

Edited by Nienke Bakker, Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten

# Vincent van Gogh A Life in Letters



*J'espère que celle-ci  
l'arrivera en bon état.  
ne craignons rien je  
suis assez calme maintenant.  
Laissez-le faire. Tu feras  
peut-être bien d'écrire encore  
une fois. mais rien d'autre  
Nous deux Vincent van Gogh*





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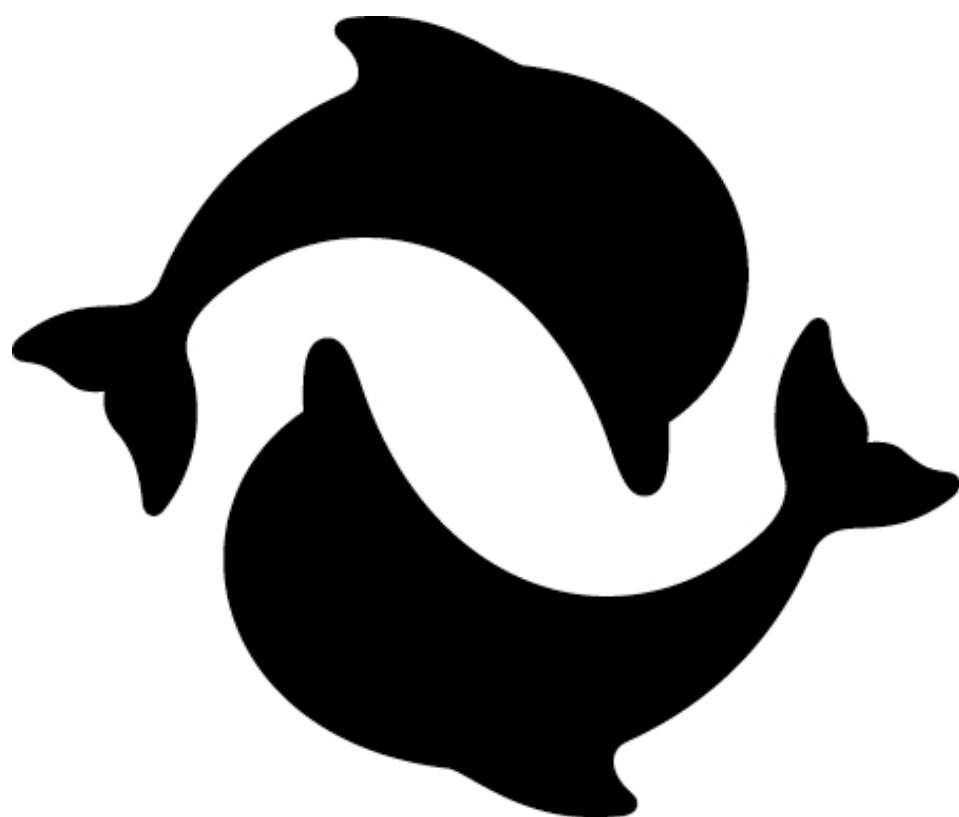
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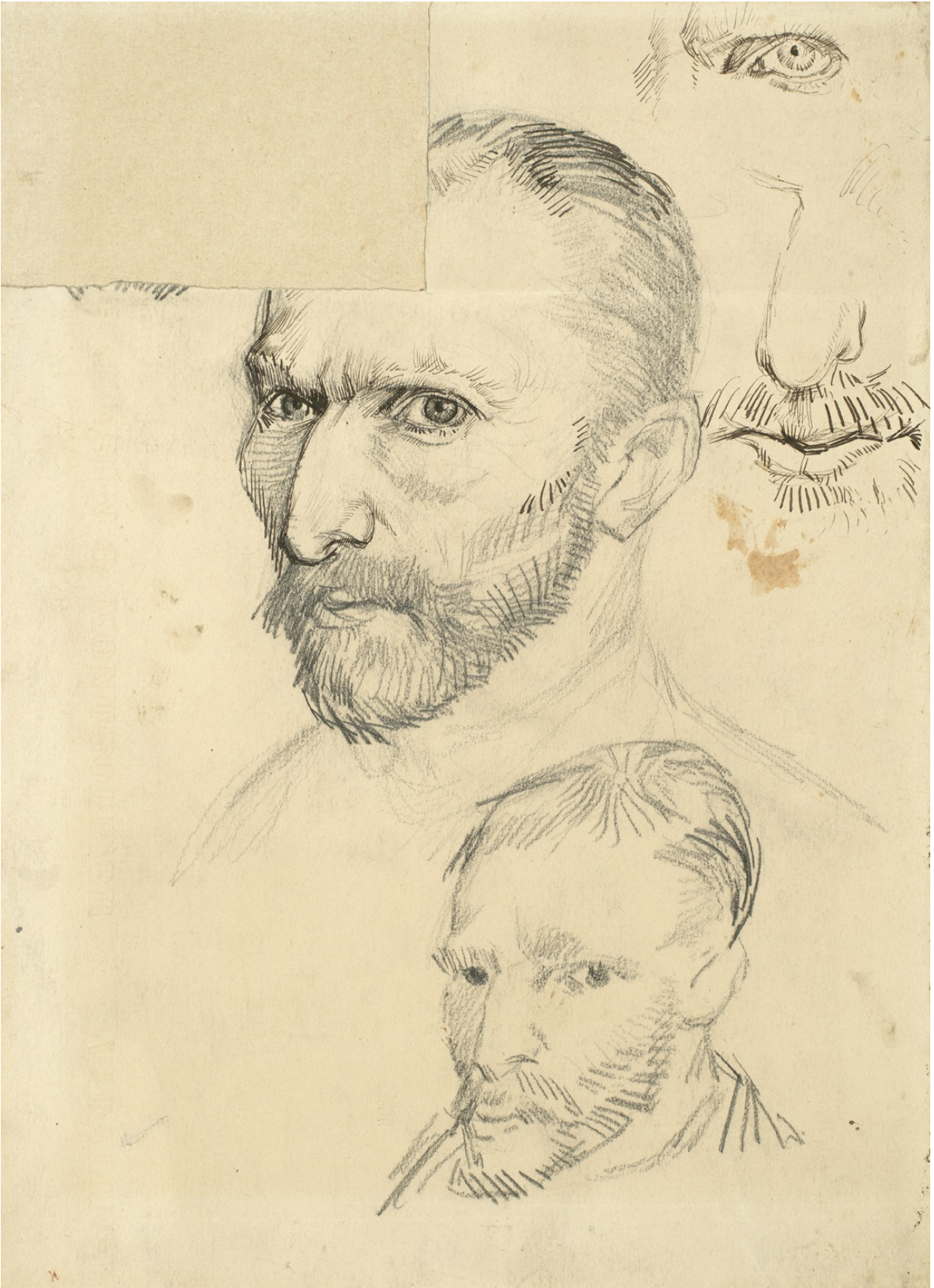
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Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten

# Vincent van Gogh

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## A Life in Letters





## About the Editors:

Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker are the editors of *Vincent van Gogh – The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition* (Thames & Hudson, 2009) and the website of Van Gogh's complete correspondence, [www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org). These publications are part of the Van Gogh Letters Project, a collaboration between the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and Huygens ING, Amsterdam.

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## Other titles of interest published by Thames & Hudson include:

*Vincent's Trees*  
Ralph Skea

*Vincent's Portraits*  
Ralph Skea

*Vincent's Books: Van Gogh and the Writers Who Inspired Him*  
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## Note to the Reader

This anthology contains 76 of Vincent van Gogh's letters, selected unabridged from 820 surviving letters penned by the artist. They are presented as Van Gogh wrote them, translated into English while staying true to the original composition and style. Roughly two thirds of the letters are in Dutch and one third in French; six letters were written in English, of which one appears in this selection.

The text is drawn from transcriptions and fresh translations of the entire existing collection of both letters and related manuscripts undertaken for the Van Gogh Letters Project (1994–2009) in a collaboration by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Huygens Institute (now Huygens ING) in Amsterdam. Absolute fidelity to Van Gogh's original words is the fundamental principle underlying this English language translation, reproducing them as closely as possible, consistent with readability, without interpretation. Van Gogh's distinctive manner of accentuating text by underlining words (sometimes several times), making them larger or loading his pen with extra ink has been rendered in this anthology through the use of italics, small capitals and regular capitals.

The letters are presented chronologically. The letter numbers that appear in each heading (given in parentheses in the introductory texts) refer to the online edition at [www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org). Notes on the letters are given at the end, with a list indicating the original source language of each letter.

Van Gogh's drawings have been reproduced here with the letters that they accompanied. A selection of paintings to which Van Gogh referred in his letters is also shown.

Life dates are included in the index. Readers requiring additional details about specific people, the places where Van Gogh stayed, the family history, quotes he uses, references to his own work and works by others, the grounds for dating the letters and other information, are directed to the online edition, which also features facsimiles and the complete texts of all of Van Gogh's letters in the original language.

# Introduction

## ‘A Man of Passions’

Vincent van Gogh's letters are without any doubt the most impressive artist's correspondence we know. Providing an inexhaustible source of information about the artist's dramatic life and exceptional work, these documents have been studied by generations of art historians and biographers. From their first publication, Van Gogh's letters have also been valued for the intrinsic qualities of his writing, his evocative style and vivid, unadorned language. They convey the artist's personal ideas and emotions in such a compelling way that they attain the universality of all great literature.

Van Gogh was passionate to the point of fanaticism and expressed himself without reservation. He showed his vulnerability by asserting ideals, by getting into arguments, and by sharing with the reader his outrage, his melancholy, and later his mental illness. The letters tell the story of his eventful life, detailing his close ties with his brother Theo, and the evolution of his artistic skills. It is the insight they give us into the development of a ground-breaking artist – a man who did not hesitate to show his most human side – that make these letters so fascinating.

With hindsight it can be said that he developed as an artist with amazing speed: it took him only ten years to draw and paint the extensive oeuvre that would make him world-famous. Recognition was a long time in coming, however. Only after his self-inflicted death in 1890 did his work finally begin to receive the attention it deserved and his reputation as a pioneering artist become firmly established – a development in which his letters played a vital role.

The letters in this publication have been carefully selected to give both the first-time reader and the connoisseur an immersive and enlightening account of Van Gogh's life and ideas during his years as an artist, from 1880 to 1890, living in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. The letters have not been abridged but have been set out in their entirety, to respect the composition and tone of Van Gogh's letters.





## Vincent van Gogh: a Complex Character

Van Gogh cut a striking figure. Theo's wife Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who became acquainted with Vincent in 1890, described him in her introduction to the 1914 letters edition as 'a robust, broad-shouldered man with a healthy complexion, a cheerful expression and something very determined in his appearance'. Small in stature, Vincent had green eyes, a red beard and freckles; his hair was ginger-coloured like that of his brother Theo, his junior by four years. He had a facial tic, and his hands seemed to be in constant motion. He was rather unsociable, which made him difficult to live with. People were often afraid of him, because of his wild and unkempt appearance and his intense manner of speaking. The way he looked and acted alienated people, which did not make life easy for him.

Van Gogh was almost always convinced that he was right, and this made him quite tiresome. He was a passionate, driven man, whose tendency to act like an egocentric bully made many people dislike him. Van Gogh refused to let this upset him: '[B]elieve me that I sometimes laugh heartily at how people suspect me (who am really just a friend of nature, of study, of work – and of people chiefly) of various acts of malice and absurdities which I never dream of' ([252](#)). He did not avoid confrontations, nor did he spare himself. Theo described him in a letter of March 1887 to their sister Willemien as 'his own enemy'.

Van Gogh was strongly inclined towards introspection: he never hesitated to explore and record his mood swings, or to redefine his moral position. He did this mainly because he had few people to talk to. Examining his own state of mind, he saw a 'highly strung' individual. At the age of twenty-nine, he sketched a merciless picture of himself:

Don't imagine that I think myself perfect – or that I believe it isn't my fault that many people find me a disagreeable character. I'm often terribly and cantankerously melancholic, irritable – yearning for sympathy as if with a kind of hunger and thirst – I become indifferent, sharp, and sometimes even pour oil on the flames if I don't get sympathy. I don't enjoy company, and dealing with people, talking to them, is often painful and difficult for me. But do you know where a great deal if not all of this comes from? Simply from nervousness – I who am terribly sensitive, both physically and morally, only really acquired it in the years when I was deeply miserable. (244)



These last words refer to the years immediately before he embarked on his artistic career.

However impulsive Van Gogh was, he generally set to work only after much deliberation: 'For the great doesn't happen through impulse alone, and is a succession of little things that are brought together' ([274](#)). Time and again, it was willpower and hard work that enabled Van Gogh to raise his low spirits.

### **A loving and protective family**

As is the case with all of us, Van Gogh's character was to a certain degree imprinted by his upbringing and family circle. Vincent, born in 1853, was the son of a village parson in rural Brabant. His parents, Theodorus van Gogh (1822–85) and Anna van Gogh-Carbentus (1819–1907), raised their children with Christian values that formed the basis of a virtuous and hardworking life. As was usual among middle-class families in the nineteenth century, they all did their utmost to prevent any member of the family from drifting away from the fold, as it were. Together they strove to lead a respectable life, in strict observance of the proprieties and in the firm conviction that those who become well-regarded members of society will encounter much good in their lives. The modest livings occupied by the Reverend Theodorus van Gogh comprised the villages of Zundert, Helvoirt, Etten and Nuenen, all situated in the province of Noord-Brabant in the south of the Netherlands. As a preacher who attached great importance to morally acceptable behaviour, he could count on a good deal of sympathy from his parishioners.

Vincent, the oldest of six children, was not the firstborn: exactly one year before his birth, his mother had been delivered of a stillborn child, likewise named Vincent. Vincent was followed by Anna (1855–1930), Theo (1857–91), Elisabeth ('Lies', 1859–1936), Willemien ('Wil', 1862–1941) and Cornelis ('Cor', 1867–1900). Their mother, a kind-hearted woman, shared the care of the family with her husband and a nursemaid.

The love between the parents and their children and the respect they showed one another is evident from the family correspondence, of which hundreds of letters have survived. Fond memories of his early years were deeply rooted in Vincent, and they surfaced during the attacks of mental illness (considered in those days to be a form of epilepsy but now generally thought to have been psychoses) that disrupted the last year and a half of his

life. At the end of 1888, after his first serious breakdown, he reported that during his illness he had seen ‘each room in the house at Zundert, each path, each plant in the garden, the views round about’ – every detail, in fact, of the surroundings of his parental home (741).

The Van Goghs wanted to give all their children an education that would allow them to develop their talents to the full, but this was no easy task, financially speaking. Their main worry turned out to be finding a suitable position for Vincent. In the nineteenth century, association with the upper class was often a means of advancement for members of the middle class, and parents who were determined to help their children succeed stimulated and even engineered their climb up the social ladder. This is apparent from the advice the Van Goghs gave their children about moving in society, which books to read, and the courtesy calls they should make. By present-day standards the children were extremely obedient, but this can be explained by the prevailing standards of conduct, which were dictated by middle-class Christian morals. When things went wrong, however, and a person was unwilling or unable to comply with these high standards, it could easily lead, as it did in Van Gogh’s case, to a gnawing sense of guilt and a permanent feeling of failure in one’s duties towards those who had one’s best interests at heart.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Revd Theodorus van Gogh (Vincent's father), date of photograph unknown; Anna van Gogh-Carbentus (Vincent's mother), 1880–88; Theo van Gogh (Vincent's brother), 1889; Willemien van Gogh (Vincent's sister), c. 1887

The duty of solidarity was characteristic of the Van Gogh family. Leading a pious life and lending one another support were in the general interest, and that was also true of other group activities that kept the family together, such as attending church, singing hymns and reading and reciting morally acceptable poetry and novels, all of which strengthened both heart and mind.

For a long time harmony prevailed in the Van Gogh family, but in 1876 there was a flare-up of the tension between Vincent and his father, and the discord continued until the latter's death in 1885. Their lifestyles became increasingly incompatible, and Vincent's social maladjustment was a constant source of irritation to his father. Vincent, in turn, was annoyed at his father's interference and narrow-mindedness; holding his ground, he showed complete disregard for the conventions his parents considered so important. His workman's clothes, his unpredictable behaviour and his association with people from the lower classes were thorns in his parents' sides. For Vincent, things became clear to him late in 1883: 'In character I'm quite different from the various members of the family, and I'm actually *not* a "Van Gogh" ' (411).

### **The bond with Theo**

Although he came to distance himself from his family, Vincent had a special bond with Theo. Theo was the apple of his parents' eyes and the diplomat and linchpin in the family. Vincent's late decision to become an artist, at the age of twenty-seven, was largely due to Theo's encouragement. The fact that it was Theo who persuaded him to pursue an artistic career greatly influenced their relationship in the following years. Theo considered it his duty to lend Vincent both moral and financial support. Throughout the ten years of Vincent's life as an artist, Theo remained an obliging benefactor, whose support was invaluable in furthering his brother's artistic endeavours. At first Vincent viewed Theo's financial support as a loan that he would one day be able to repay – an advance on what he would be earning as soon as buyers could be found for his work. When this failed to happen, however, the brothers agreed that Theo could deal freely with Vincent's drawings and paintings. Theo thought that brotherliness was much more important than



cashing in on his investment, although as time went on he also became convinced of the special quality and value of Vincent's work.

It may appear as though the relationship between the brothers was one-sided, with the calm, generous Theo always ready to help his stubborn impulsive brother and receiving little in return. But Theo, for his part, depended heavily on Vincent, describing him to his wife Jo as 'adviser and brother to both of us, in every sense of the word'. Vincent and Theo's mutual dependence continued to grow over the years, but not without many conflicts. At times Vincent was mean and nasty to Theo, and he always tried to get his way. This put a lot of strain on their relationship, so much so that at one point Theo was convinced that it would be better for them to part ways. Yet their fraternal friendship proved able to withstand such fierce clashes. Theo supported Vincent through life's difficulties and acted as a buffer between him and the 'hostile world' (406). The kind-hearted Theo, who felt responsible for Vincent his whole life and always remained loyal to him, protected his brother and saved him from many pitfalls.

Vincent repressed his feelings of guilt towards Theo, his dearest friend and confidant, and the only one who could cope with his difficult character. Vincent was well aware that his brother was investing a great deal in him, and the knowledge that he would never be able to repay Theo occasionally made him despair.

## **Searching for his Destiny**

### **Working in the art trade, 1869–1876**

Vincent attended the village school in Zundert and received lessons at home from a governess. He then spent several years at a boarding school for boys in Zevenbergen and went from there to a secondary school in Tilburg, the Hogere Burgerschool Willem II. After living at home for another year, at the end of July 1869 he finally found – at the age of sixteen – a position as the youngest employee of the international art dealer Goupil & Cie in The Hague.



Goupil & Cie Gallery, The Hague, c. 1900

It was one of his father's brothers, also called Vincent (Uncle Cent), who introduced Vincent to the art world. For years Uncle Cent had been a

partner in the firm of Goupil & Cie, and he now put in a good word for his nephew. Vincent was thus given a chance to become intimately acquainted with the art trade. The firm flourished, its success due in part to the publication and sale of reproductions of numerous artworks. Van Gogh's work for an art dealer – spending his days surrounded by paintings, prints and photographs – and his visits to museums laid the basis for his impressive knowledge of art. His boss, Hermanus Tersteeg, showed him the ropes and taught him a great deal about art and literature.

Goupil & Cie had a number of branches, and in May 1873 Van Gogh began working for the company's London branch. The correspondence from these years reveals that he was seeking a place outside the protected world in which he had grown up. In his spare time he walked as much as he could and worked in the garden. Sometimes he was very homesick. On holidays such as Christmas and Easter, the family tended to gather at the Helvoirt parsonage, where the Van Goghs were now living. By this time Theo was also working for Goupil, starting at the Brussels branch and moving to the Hague branch at the end of 1873. In London Vincent changed address often: in August he moved to Brixton, and a year later to Kennington. His appreciation of the city grew, as did his interest in art and literature. His letters contain many quotations from books that had moved him; Theo, in turn, sent his brother poetry. Their tastes and preferences were perfectly in keeping with the fashions of the day: romantic poetry (Heinrich Heine, Alphonse de Lamartine) and Victorian novels (George Eliot, Charles Dickens). Literature was a comfort to the boys and helped them expand their horizons.

### **Religious obsession**

After a temporary transfer to the main branch in Paris, Vincent returned in early 1875 to London, where he began working for the gallery of Holloway & Sons, which had been taken over by Goupil & Cie. In mid-May he was back at the Paris branch. He gave detailed accounts of his visits to the Salon, the Louvre and the Musée du Luxembourg, and he described the prints he had hung in his small room in Montmartre, where he became friendly with his housemate, Harry Gladwell. Night after night he read the Bible out loud to this Englishman: 'We intend to read it all the way through' (55). Van Gogh became more and more obsessed with Bible study and went to church frequently. The letters written at this time are full of references to Holy



Scripture, rhyming psalms, Evangelical hymns and devotional literature. This religious obsession, which lasted for several years, caused him to neglect his work and was one of the reasons for his eventual dismissal from Goupil's.

In October 1875 the Van Gogh family moved to the village of Etten, where the Reverend Van Gogh had been appointed. Vincent spent Christmas and New Year's with them here. When he returned to Paris, he heard that Goupil had decided to terminate his contract as of 1 April, partly because he had stayed away too long during the busy time at the end of the year, though another cause of consternation was his attitude to his job. His father was deeply disappointed, and wrote about it in what were, by his standards, very bitter letters to Theo, since the consequences for the family were especially painful: 'How much he has spurned! What bitter sorrow for Uncle Cent. What a bitter experience. We are glad that we live in relative isolation here and would really like to shut ourselves in. It is an unspeakable sorrow.' Vincent seemed less upset by this loss of face, although he definitely felt guilty. Working in the art trade for six years had indeed taught him a lot, but it had not made him happy or opened up any prospects for a career. His future was now completely up in the air.

## **The Search for a Calling, 1876–1880**

Van Gogh spent the next four years in England, the Netherlands and Belgium, trying to find his direction in life. After his dismissal from Goupil & Cie, he travelled in April 1876 to Ramsgate, near London, to work as an assistant teacher at a boarding school for boys run by William Stokes. After a trial period of one month, he was allowed to stay, but without a salary. Shortly afterwards the school – along with Van Gogh – moved to Isleworth. There he enjoyed long walks and took pleasure in the boys' company, but he soon realized that he would prefer pastoral work, something 'between minister and missionary, in the suburbs of London among working folk' (84). Not only that, but he was also urgently in need of a steady income.

In July he went to work at another boarding school, also in Isleworth, run by the Methodist minister Thomas Slade-Jones. Vincent's letters to Theo became longer and longer, owing to serious digressions and an abundance of biblical quotations. His increasing interest in religion was accompanied by more moralistic reading, his favourites being George Eliot's *Scenes of*

*Clerical Life* and *Felix Holt*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Thomas a Kempis's *De imitatione Christi*. To his immense satisfaction he was given his first opportunity to deliver a sermon at the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Richmond in October. The sermon, which he copied out for Theo and enclosed in a letter, compared life to a pilgrimage (96). Shortly after this he became a lay preacher at the Congregational Church in Turnham Green, and also taught at their Sunday school, but as an unpaid volunteer. While he was home for Christmas – as always, a time for reflection, when they all came together in a veritable conclave – the family discussed Vincent's limited prospects in England, and it was decided that he would stay in the Netherlands.

Uncle Vincent arranged a job for him as a clerk-cum-factotum for Blussé & Van Braam, a bookseller in Dordrecht. During this period Van Gogh's religious fanaticism intensified. His letters were now full of devotional texts and musings about his desire to become a preacher; numerous biblical prints decorated the walls of his room; and he attended one church service after another, exploring a wide variety of denominations. A line from Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians – 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing' – became a motto that he wore like 'a good cloak in the storm of life' (109).

### **Yet another failure**

Van Gogh's struggle was bound up with his own uncertainty about his place in the world. He dreamed of a vocation in the church, spreading the Word as a preacher, like his father. He viewed striving to achieve that goal as a means of freeing himself from the 'torrent of reproaches' that he had 'heard and felt' (106). Influenced by his Calvinist upbringing, he spoke more than once of the conscience as man's infallible, God-given moral compass. But however conscientiously he tried to live his life, somehow he could not find the right path. His work at the bookshop was merely a temporary solution; the family continued to search for a suitable situation for him. Uncle Cent, who had been so supportive up to now, stopped trying to help when it became apparent that his nephew was serious about becoming a preacher.

Vincent – who had no high school diploma – approached other uncles in Amsterdam for suggestions and help in preparing himself to study theology. His family was by no means convinced that this was his true calling, and they worried about his unstable mental state. Even so, Vincent

moved to Amsterdam in good spirits in May 1877 and went to live with one of his father's brothers, Uncle Jan van Gogh, director of the naval dockyard. A maternal uncle, the minister Johannes Stricker, took it upon himself to supervise Vincent's studies.

Preparing for the university entrance exam proved extremely difficult for Vincent. As he so often did, he compensated for his lack of ability by going for long walks and writing about them in letters full of lengthy, evocative passages. No matter how hard he tried to persevere in his studies, he became more and more downcast and disheartened. He wrote to Theo that his head was numb and burning and his thoughts confused. Once again he realized that he had failed in the task he had set himself. Years later he would look back on his year in Amsterdam as 'the worst time' he had ever been through (154). Dejected and defeated, he returned to his parents' house in Etten, hoping that he might become a Sunday-school teacher.

### **Evangelist in the Borinage**

In July 1878 Vincent went to Brussels in the company of his father and the Reverend Slade-Jones to discuss his admission to a Flemish training college for evangelists. He was given a three-month trial period and sent to work in Laken, where he lived with a board member's family. He was not accepted for the training course, however, and left in early December 1878 for the Borinage, the mining region of Belgium, to look for evangelical work. In mid-January 1879 he was given a six-month appointment as a lay preacher in Wasmès, a village near Mons. His tasks included giving Bible readings, teaching children and visiting the sick. Van Gogh was confronted with real poverty and squalor, but he devoted himself wholeheartedly to caring for the sick and injured. He identified so much with the poor that he gave away all his possessions and lived in a small hut, where he slept on the ground.

This exaggerated display of humility was one reason for the evangelization committee's dissatisfaction with him; they also judged him to be lacking in both the gift of speech and the organizational skills necessary to hold gatherings at which the congregation could be taught the Gospel. His appointment was terminated, and in August he left for the nearby village of Cuesmes, where he went to live with an evangelist. Impressed by this 'singular, remarkable and picturesque region of the country' (150), he concentrated more and more on drawing. For years he had drawn for his own pleasure, and occasionally included sketches in his letters. Now, however,



drawing – together with writing – became an increasingly important way of capturing his impressions in images: ‘Often sit up drawing until late at night to have some keepsakes and to strengthen thoughts that automatically spring to mind upon seeing the things’ (153).

Theo went to visit him, and they discussed Vincent’s future. Feelings must have run high during this talk, because immediately after Theo’s departure, Vincent defended himself in a letter that reveals the fears and differences of opinion that were seriously undermining his relations with Theo and the rest of the family (154). The rift between the brothers ultimately led them to stop corresponding for nearly a year. Vincent broke the silence with a *cri de coeur* in which he expressed himself with exceptional force ([155](#)). He felt like a caged bird, a good-for-nothing, but he wanted to make himself useful and find his vocation in life, and he accepted the help Theo was offering him.

## **Cuesmes, between about Tuesday, 22 and Thursday, 24 June 1880**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 155)

My dear Theo,

It’s with some reluctance that I write to you, not having done so for so long, and that for many a reason. Up to a certain point you’ve become a stranger to me, and I too am one to you, perhaps more than you think; perhaps it would be better for us not to go on this way.

It’s possible that I wouldn’t even have written to you now if it weren’t that I’m under the obligation, the necessity, of writing to you. If, I say, you yourself hadn’t imposed that necessity. I learned at Etten that you had sent fifty francs for me; well, I accepted them. Certainly reluctantly, certainly with a rather melancholy feeling, but I’m in some sort of impasse or mess; what else can one do?

And so it’s to thank you for it that I’m writing to you.

As you may perhaps know, I’m back in the Borinage; my father spoke to me of staying in the vicinity of Etten instead; I said no, and I believe I acted thus for the best. Without wishing to, I’ve more or less become some sort of impossible and suspect character in the family, in any event,

somebody who isn't trusted, so how, then, could I be useful to anybody in any way?

That's why, first of all, so I'm inclined to believe, it is beneficial and the best and most reasonable position to take, for me to go away and to remain at a proper distance, as if I didn't exist. What moulting is to birds, the time when they change their feathers, that's adversity or misfortune, hard times, for us human beings. One may remain in this period of moulting, one may also come out of it renewed, but it's not to be done in public, however; it's scarcely entertaining, it's not cheerful, so it's a matter of making oneself scarce. Well, so be it. Now, although it may be a thing of rather demoralizing difficulty to regain the trust of an entire family perhaps not entirely devoid of prejudices and other similarly honourable and fashionable qualities, nevertheless, I'm not utterly without hope that little by little, slowly and surely, a good understanding may be re-established with this person and that.

In the first place, then, I'd like to see this good understanding, to say no more, re-established between my father and me, and I would also be very keen that it be re-established between the two of us. Good understanding is infinitely better than misunderstanding.

I must now bore you with certain abstract things; however, I'd like you to listen to them patiently.

I, for one, am a man of passions, capable of and liable to do rather foolish things for which I sometimes feel rather sorry. I do often find myself speaking or acting somewhat too quickly when it would be better to wait more patiently. I think that other people may also sometimes do similar foolish things. Now that being so, what's to be done, must one consider oneself a dangerous man, incapable of anything at all? I don't think so. But it's a matter of trying by every means to turn even these passions to good account. For example, to name one passion among others, I have a more or less irresistible passion for books, and I have a need continually to educate myself, to study, if you like, precisely as I need to eat my bread. You'll be able to understand that yourself. When I was in different surroundings, in surroundings of paintings and works of art, you well know that I then took a violent passion for those surroundings that went as far as enthusiasm. And I don't repent it, and now, far from the country again, I often feel homesick for the country of paintings.

You may perhaps clearly remember that I knew very well (and it may well be that I still know) what Rembrandt was or what Millet was, or Jules

Dupré or Delacroix or Millais or M. Maris.

Good — now I no longer have those surroundings — however, that something that's called soul, they claim that it never dies and that it lives for ever and seeks for ever and for ever and for evermore.

So instead of succumbing to homesickness, I said to myself, one's country or native land is everywhere. So instead of giving way to despair, I took the way of active melancholy as long as I had strength for activity, or in other words, I preferred the melancholy that hopes and aspires and searches to the one that despairs, mournful and stagnant. So I studied the books I had to hand rather seriously, such as the Bible and Michelet's *La révolution Française*, and then last winter, Shakespeare and a little V. Hugo and Dickens and Beecher Stowe, and then recently Aeschylus, and then several other less classic authors, several good minor masters. You well know that one who is ranked among the minor (?) masters is called Fabritius or Bida.

Now the man who is absorbed in all that is sometimes shocking, to others, and without wishing to, offends to a greater or lesser degree against certain forms and customs and social conventions. It's a pity, though, when people take that in bad part. For example, you well know that I've frequently neglected my appearance, I admit it, and I admit that it's shocking. But look, money troubles and poverty have something to do with it, and then a profound discouragement also has something to do with it, and then it's sometimes a good means of ensuring for oneself the solitude needed to be able to go somewhat more deeply into this or that field of study with which one is preoccupied. One very necessary field of study is medicine; there's hardly a man who doesn't try to know a little bit about it, who doesn't try to understand at least what it's about, and here I still don't know anything at all about it. But all of that absorbs you, but all of that preoccupies you, but all of that makes you dream, ponder, think.

And now for as much as 5 years, perhaps, I don't know exactly, I've been more or less without a position, wandering hither and thither. Now you say, from such and such a time you've been going downhill, you've faded away, you've done nothing. Is that entirely true?

It's true that sometimes I've earned my crust of bread, sometimes some friend has given me it as a favour; I've lived as best I could, better or worse, as things went; it's true that I've lost several people's trust, it's true that my financial affairs are in a sorry state, it's true that the future's not a little dark, it's true that I could have done better, it's true that just in terms of earning



my living I've lost time, it's true that my studies themselves are in a rather sorry and disheartening state, and that I lack more, infinitely more than I have. But is that called going downhill, and is that called doing nothing?

Perhaps you'll say, but why didn't you continue as people would have wished you to continue, along the university road?

To that I'd say only this, it costs too much and then, that future was no better than the present one, on the road that I'm on. But on the road that I'm on I must continue; if I do nothing, if I don't study, if I don't keep on trying, then I'm lost, then woe betide me. That's how I see this, to keep on, keep on, that's what's needed.

But what's your ultimate goal, you'll say. That goal will become clearer, will take shape slowly and surely, as the croquis becomes a sketch and the sketch a painting, as one works more seriously, as one digs deeper into the originally vague idea, the first fugitive, passing thought, unless it becomes firm.

You must know that it's the same with evangelists as with artists. There's an old, often detestable, tyrannical academic school, the abomination of desolation, in fact — men having, so to speak, a suit of armour, a steel breastplate of prejudices and conventions. Those men, when they're in charge of things, have positions at their disposal, and by a system of circumlocution seek to support their protégés, and to exclude the natural man from among them.

Their God is like the God of Shakespeare's drunkard, Falstaff, 'the inside of a church'; in truth, certain evangelical (???) gentlemen find themselves, by a strange conjunction (perhaps they themselves, if they were capable of human feeling, would be somewhat surprised) find themselves holding the very same point of view as the drunkard in spiritual matters. But there's little fear that their blindness will ever turn into clear-sightedness on the subject.

This state of affairs has its bad side for someone who doesn't agree with all that, and who protests against it with all his heart and with all his soul and with all the indignation of which he is capable.

Myself, I respect academicians who are not like those academicians, but the respectable ones are more thinly scattered than one would believe at first glance. Now one of the reasons why I'm now without a position, why I've been without a position for years, it's quite simply because I have different

ideas from these gentlemen who give positions to individuals who think like them.

It's not a simple matter of appearance, as people have hypocritically held it against me, it's something more serious than that, I assure you.

Why am I telling you all this? — not to grumble, not to apologize for things in which I may be more or less wrong, but quite simply to tell you this: on your last visit, last summer, when we walked together near the disused mine they call La Sorcière, you reminded me that there was a time when we also walked together near the old canal and mill of Rijswijk, and then, you said, we were in agreement on many things, but, you added — you've really changed since then, you're not the same any more. Well, that's not quite how it is; what has changed is that my life was less difficult then and my future less dark, but as far as my inner self, as far as my way of seeing and thinking are concerned, they haven't changed. But if in fact there were a change, it's that now I think and I believe and I love more seriously what then, too, I already thought, I believed and I loved.

So it would be a misunderstanding if you were to persist in believing that, for example, I would be less warm now towards Rembrandt or Millet or Delacroix, or whomever or whatever, because it's the opposite. But you see, there are several things that are to be believed and to be loved; there's something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare and something of Correggio or Sarto in Michelet, and something of Delacroix in V. Hugo, and in Beecher Stowe there's something of Ary Scheffer. And in Bunyan there's something of M. Maris or of Millet, a reality more real than reality, so to speak, but you have to know how to read him; then there are extraordinary things in him, and he knows how to say inexpressible things; and then there's something of Rembrandt in the Gospels or of the Gospels in Rembrandt, as you wish, it comes to more or less the same, provided that one understands it rightly, without trying to twist it in the wrong direction, and if one bears in mind the equivalents of the comparisons, which make no claim to diminish the merits of the original figures.

If now you can forgive a man for going more deeply into paintings, admit also that the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt, and I even think that the two complement each other.

I really love the portrait of a man by Fabritius, which one day, also while taking a walk together, we looked at for a long time in the Haarlem museum. Good, but I love Dickens's 'Richard Cartone' in his *Paris et*

Londres en 1793 just as much, and I could show you other strangely vivid figures in yet other books, with more or less striking resemblance. And I think that Kent, a man in Shakespeare's King Lear, is just as noble and distinguished a character as any figure of Th. de Keyser, although Kent and King Lear are supposed to have lived a long time earlier. To put it no higher, my God, how beautiful that is. Shakespeare — who is as mysterious as he? — his language and his way of doing things are surely the equal of any brush trembling with fever and emotion. But one has to learn to read, as one has to learn to see and learn to live.

So you mustn't think that I'm rejecting this or that; in my unbelief I'm a believer, in a way, and though having changed I am the same, and my torment is none other than this, what could I be good for, couldn't I serve and be useful in some way, how could I come to know more thoroughly, and go more deeply into this subject or that? Do you see, it continually torments me, and then you feel a prisoner in penury, excluded from participating in this work or that, and such and such necessary things are beyond your reach. Because of that, you're not without melancholy, and you feel emptiness where there could be friendship and high and serious affections, and you feel a terrible discouragement gnawing at your psychic energy itself, and fate seems able to put a barrier against the instincts for affection, or a tide of revulsion that overcomes you. And then you say, How long, O Lord! Well, then, what can I say; does what goes on inside show on the outside? Someone has a great fire in his soul and nobody ever comes to warm themselves at it, and passers-by see nothing but a little smoke at the top of the chimney and then go on their way. So now what are we to do, keep this fire alive inside, have salt in ourselves, wait patiently, but with how much impatience, await the hour, I say, when whoever wants to, will come and sit down there, will stay there, for all I know? May whoever believes in God await the hour, which will come sooner or later.

Now for the moment all my affairs are going badly, so it would seem, and that has been so for a not so inconsiderable period of time, and it may stay that way for a future of longer or shorter duration, but it may be that after everything has seemed to go wrong, it may then all go better. I'm not counting on it, perhaps it won't happen, but supposing there were to come some change for the better, I would count that as so much gained; I'd be pleased about it, I'd say, well then, there you are, there was something, after all.

But you'll say, though, you're an execrable creature since you have impossible ideas on religion and childish scruples of conscience. If I have any that are impossible or childish, may I be freed from them; I'd like nothing better. But here's where I am on this subject, more or less. You'll find in Souvestre's *Le philosophe sous les toits* how a man of the people, a simple workman, very wretched, if you will, imagined his mother country, 'Perhaps you have never thought about what your mother country is, he continued, putting a hand on my shoulder; it's everything that surrounds you, everything that raised and nourished you, everything you have loved. This countryside that you see, these houses, these trees, these young girls, laughing as they pass by over there, that's your mother country! The laws that protect you, the bread that is the reward of your labour, the words that you exchange, the joy and sadness that come to you from the men and the things among which you live, that's your mother country! The little room where you once used to see your mother, the memories she left you, the earth in which she rests, that's your mother country! You see it, you breathe it everywhere! Just think, your rights and your duties, your attachments and your needs, your memories and your gratitude, put all that together under a single name, and that name will be your mother country.'

Now likewise, everything in men and in their works that is truly good, and beautiful with an inner moral, spiritual and sublime beauty, I think that that comes from God, and that everything that is bad and wicked in the works of men and in men, that's not from God, and God doesn't find it good, either. But without intending it, I'm always inclined to believe that the best way of knowing God is to love a great deal. Love that friend, that person, that thing, whatever you like, you'll be on the right path to knowing more thoroughly, afterwards; that's what I say to myself. But you must love with a high, serious intimate sympathy, with a will, with intelligence, and you must always seek to know more thoroughly, better, and more. That leads to God, that leads to unshakeable faith.

Someone, to give an example, will love Rembrandt, but seriously, that man will know there is a God, he'll believe firmly in Him.

Someone will make a deep study of the history of the French Revolution — he will not be an unbeliever, he will see that in great things, too, there is a sovereign power that manifests itself.

Someone will have attended, for a time only, the free course at the great university of poverty, and will have paid attention to the things he sees with



his eyes and hears with his ears, and will have thought about it; he too, will come to believe, and will perhaps learn more about it than he could say.

Try to understand the last word of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces; there will be God in it. Someone has written or said it in a book, someone in a painting.

And quite simply read the Bible, and the Gospels, because that will give you something to think about, and a great deal to think about and everything to think about, well then, think about this great deal, think about this everything, it raises your thinking above the ordinary level, despite yourself. Since we know how to read, let's read, then!

Now, afterwards, we may well at times be a little absent-minded, a little dreamy; there are those who become a little too absent-minded, a little too dreamy; that happens to me, perhaps, but it's my own fault. And after all, who knows, wasn't there some cause; it was for this or that reason that I was absorbed, preoccupied, anxious, but you get over that. The dreamer sometimes falls into a pit, but they say that afterwards he comes up out of it again.

And the absent-minded man, at times he too has his presence of mind, as if in compensation. He's sometimes a character who has his *raison d'être* for one reason or another which one doesn't always see right away, or which one forgets through being absent-minded, mostly unintentionally. One who has been rolling along for ages as if tossed on a stormy sea arrives at his destination at last; one who has seemed good for nothing and incapable of filling any position, any role, finds one in the end, and, active and capable of action, shows himself entirely different from what he had seemed at first sight.

I'm writing you somewhat at random whatever comes into my pen; I would be very happy if you could somehow see in me something other than some sort of idler.

Because there are idlers and idlers, who form a contrast.

There's the one who's an idler through laziness and weakness of character, through the baseness of his nature; you may, if you think fit, take me for such a one. Then there's the other idler, the idler truly despite himself, who is gnawed inwardly by a great desire for action, who does nothing because he finds it impossible to do anything since he's imprisoned in something, so to speak, because he doesn't have what he would need to be productive, because the inevitability of circumstances is reducing him to this

point. Such a person doesn't always know himself what he could do, but he feels by instinct, I'm good for something, even so! I feel I have a *raison d'être*! I know that I could be a quite different man! For what then could I be of use, for what could I serve! There's something within me, so what is it! That's an entirely different idler; you may, if you think fit, take me for such a one.

In the springtime a bird in a cage knows very well that there's something he'd be good for; he feels very clearly that there's something to be done but he can't do it; what it is he can't clearly remember, and he has vague ideas and says to himself, 'the others are building their nests and making their little ones and raising the brood', and he bangs his head against the bars of his cage. And then the cage stays there and the bird is mad with suffering. 'Look, there's an idler', says another passing bird — that fellow's a sort of man of leisure. And yet the prisoner lives and doesn't die; nothing of what's going on within shows outside, he's in good health, he's rather cheerful in the sunshine. But then comes the season of migration. A bout of melancholy — but, say the children who look after him, he's got everything that he needs in his cage, after all — but he looks at the sky outside, heavy with storm clouds, and within himself feels a rebellion against fate. I'm in a cage, I'm in a cage, and so I lack for nothing, you fools! Me, I have everything I need! Ah, for pity's sake, freedom, to be a bird like other birds!

An idle man like that resembles an idle bird like that.

And it's often impossible for men to do anything, prisoners in I don't know what kind of horrible, horrible, very horrible cage. There is also, I know, release, belated release. A reputation ruined rightly or wrongly, poverty, inevitability of circumstances, misfortune; that creates prisoners.

You may not always be able to say what it is that confines, that immures, that seems to bury, and yet you feel I know not what bars, I know not what gates — walls.

Is all that imaginary, a fantasy? I don't think so; and then you ask yourself, Dear God, is this for long, is this for ever, is this for eternity?

You know, what makes the prison disappear is every deep, serious attachment. To be friends, to be brothers, to love; that opens the prison through sovereign power, through a most powerful spell. But he who doesn't have that remains in death. But where sympathy springs up again, life springs up again.

And the prison is sometimes called Prejudice, misunderstanding, fatal ignorance of this or that, mistrust, false shame.

But to speak of something else, if I've come down in the world, you, on the other hand, have gone up. And while I may have lost friendships, you have won them. That's what I'm happy about, I say it in truth, and that will always make me glad. If you were not very serious and not very profound, I might fear that it won't last, but since I think you are very serious and very profound, I'm inclined to believe that it will last.

But if it became possible for you to see in me something other than an idler of the bad kind, I would be very pleased about that.

And if I could ever do something for you, be useful to you in some way, know that I am at your service. Since I've accepted what you gave me, you could equally ask me for something if I could be of service to you in some way or another; it would make me happy and I would consider it a sign of trust. We're quite distant from one another, and in certain respects we may have different ways of seeing, but nevertheless, sometime or some day one of us might be able to be of use to the other. For today, I shake your hand, thanking you again for the kindness you've shown me.

Now if you'd like to write to me one of these days, my address is care of C. Decrucq, rue du Pavillon 8, Cuesmes, near Mons, and know that by writing you'll do me good.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

# Beginning as an Artist

## Brussels, Etten, The Hague, November 1880– September 1883

During his time in the Borinage, Vincent had become estranged not only from Theo, but also from his parents. As early as 1875 they had discussed Vincent's 'otherness' and worried about his religious fanaticism. When he was rejected for the training course to become an evangelist, they urged him to take a different path and try a practical occupation. In their eyes he remained 'obstinate and pigheaded', however, and refused to take their advice. Vincent dreaded returning home, but he nevertheless paid two short visits to his parents. They found his behaviour so alarming that his father talked openly about having him committed to the hospital for the mentally ill in Geel in Belgium, but this idea met with fierce resistance from Vincent.

Now that their eldest son had been found wanting, it was Theo's responsibility to uphold the family honour. In November 1879 he had been given a permanent position with Goupil & Cie in Paris, so he was now able to contribute to his brother's upkeep. Vincent received his first allowance from Theo in March 1880. He had been doing more drawing, and Theo began urging him to make art his profession. Vincent decided to give it a try; this choice proved definitive.

Vincent threw himself passionately into a self-devised programme of study. Hoping to earn a living as an illustrator, he turned his full attention to drawing. Because he knew that he had to start from scratch, learning as much as possible about materials, perspective, proportion and anatomy, he read handbooks and worked from morning to night, making copies after prints by famous masters, such as Jean-François Millet, and from the examples in the drawing course Theo had sent him.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Anton Mauve, date of photograph unknown; Kee Vos-Stricker and her son Jan, c. 1881; Anthon van Rappard, c. 1880

Vincent was living with a miner's family in Cuesmes, and in July 1880 he rented a small atelier in the house next door where he could work. This was far from ideal as a studio, however. The lack of space and a growing need to be near museums and artists prompted him to move to Brussels, where he found lodgings at 72 boulevard du Midi. Among the artists he met in Brussels was an acquaintance of Theo's, Anthon van Rappard, a Dutch artist who allowed Van Gogh to work in his spacious studio. It was the beginning of a friendship that would last throughout Van Gogh's stay in the Netherlands and which fulfilled his longing to exchange ideas with a fellow artist.

On the advice of the painter Willem Roelofs – whom Theo had advised him to visit – Van Gogh enrolled as a student at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts for the course 'Drawing from the Antique'. After a month he had had enough: no doubt he had been forced to endure much criticism of his under-developed technique and limited knowledge of anatomy and perspective. As a result of that experience, Vincent was filled with loathing for academic instruction – a subject that would crop up often in his letters – and believed even more strongly that an artist's means of expression was more important than technique.

On 1 February 1881 Theo was appointed manager of Goupil's branch on the boulevard Montmartre in Paris (later taken over by Boussod, Valadon & Cie), and from then on he decided to shoulder all Vincent's living expenses.

Lack of money and of a convenient studio space forced Van Gogh to return at the end of April 1881 to his parents' house in Etten, where he would remain until Christmas. He worked and slept in a room in the annex beside the house. In these months he worked increasingly on figure studies, often out of doors, modelled on locals who posed for him. Anthon van Rappard visited him in mid-June, and they spent almost a fortnight there painting and drawing landscapes.

During a short stay in The Hague, Van Gogh visited museums and exhibitions – not for the first time, but now as an artist – and received welcome advice from Anton Mauve, a successful painter of The Hague School who was married to Van Gogh's cousin, Jet Carbentus. Vincent was in his element; upon his return to Etten he went back to drawing peasant

figures with renewed energy, and quoting a phrase used by Mauve, he observed with satisfaction that ‘the factory is in full swing’ ([172](#)).

In the summer of 1881, Kee Vos, the widowed daughter of Uncle Stricker, came to stay with the family at the parsonage. Van Gogh fell passionately in love with her, although he did not mention this in his letters to his brother until November. She was adamant from the beginning that she could never return his feelings, yet Van Gogh persisted relentlessly in his pursuit of her, unshakable in his conviction that she could, and would, come to love him; he even made her a proposal of marriage. His reckless desire for her deeply embarrassed his parents, who considered him to be shaming the family, and his father warned Vincent that he risked breaking family ties with his ‘indelicate and untimely’ behaviour. Vincent, however, grew ever more hostile to his family’s opinions and sensitivities. By the end of the year the situation reached breaking point.

At Christmas, after an angry row during which he told his clergy-man father he wanted nothing more to do with religion, Vincent was asked to leave the house. Furious, he left that same day for The Hague.

Van Gogh set himself up in a modest studio at Schenkweg 138, at the edge of the city. He was still suffering from the negative reactions to his love for Kee, and abhorred his family’s shortsightedness. Although Theo accused Vincent of making their parents’ lives ‘miserable and nearly impossible’, he continued to support him. Theo, who made a good living throughout Vincent’s artistic career, gave some fifteen per cent of his income to his brother. Vincent’s tendency to spend money too easily was a habit inseparable from his unrelenting passion for work: he was always running out of drawing and painting materials; he needed models, who had to be paid to pose; and he was determined to find adequate living and working quarters every time he moved house.

His early days in The Hague, then the cultural capital of the Netherlands, started off well: he received advice and support from Tersteeg, his former boss at Goupil’s, and Mauve, who introduced him at the painters’ society Pulchri Studio, the ideal place to draw from a model and meet other artists. Within just a few months, however, relations between Van Gogh and both these men begun to sour as their disapproval of his lifestyle and attitudes mounted. They disapproved in particular of Van Gogh’s relations with Sien Hoornik, a pregnant former prostitute who became his regular

model. Sien's mother and daughter also posed for him frequently, at first for a fee, and later, when he and Sien became lovers, for free.

Vincent made contact with other artists in The Hague, among them George Breitner, and produced many drawings, as well as two series of cityscapes for his Uncle Cor. His favourite subjects were workers and impoverished people. He hoped that his art would reach ordinary folk; he wanted to make figures 'from the people for the people' (294). Still thinking of becoming an illustrator, he collected hundreds of illustrated magazines. The prints in these magazines – wood engravings made by professional engravers after drawings by well-known artists – moved him with their realism, immediacy and unpolished technique.

Vincent exchanged prints with Van Rappard, and their letters contained long discussions about artistic and technical questions. At this time he also read Alfred Sensier's *La vie et l'oeuvre de Jean-François Millet* (published in English as *Jean-François Millet, Peasant and Painter*), a highly romanticized biography of the Barbizon painter who led a simple life among peasants which would become of crucial importance to his views about the role of the artist.

In June Van Gogh spent several weeks in hospital being treated for venereal disease. During this time a reconciliation came about between him and his parents. Learning of Vincent's condition, his father travelled to The Hague to visit him. On leaving hospital, Vincent moved to a better and more spacious studio farther down the street. Two weeks later he was joined by Sien, her five-year-old daughter, Maria and her newborn son, Willem. When he broke this news to Theo, Vincent tried to deflect criticism by citing Michelet's ethical and didactic books about women, love and marriage, and went on to defend his relationship with Sien repeatedly and vehemently in the face of strong condemnation, especially from Tersteeg and the conservative Van Gogh family. Vincent's letters reveal his version of reality: a man is duty-bound to help a fallen woman, and it stands to reason that this will cost money. His idea of respectability was obviously very different from that of most people of his social background. He dressed like a member of the working class, to the dismay of Theo and the rest of the family.

Once Vincent was established in his new studio, he settled into a rare period of relative calm that enabled him to focus more intently on his art. He made landscape studies in watercolours and oils and many drawings of working men and women, and also started to experiment with lithography



and a large variety of drawing materials. He sent Theo drawings of folk types, town views and landscapes; his letters are full of exuberant and lyrical descriptions of colour.

In August 1883, Vincent began making plans to leave for the rural province of Drenthe, recommended to him by his artist friends for the beauty of its countryside. He was anxious to leave as soon as possible to capture the autumn colours and to start work on rustic scenes in the vein of the Barbizon and Hague School artists. In an atmosphere of growing mistrust, his relationship with Sien ended, but he worried about leaving her since he was sure that her family would lead her back into prostitution.

## Brussels, Monday, 1 November 1880

To Theo van Gogh (letter 160)

Brussels, 1 Nov.

72 blvd du Midi

My dear Theo,

I want to tell you a few things in reply to your letter.

First of all, that I went to see Mr Roelofs the day after I received your letter, and he told me that his opinion was that from now on I should concentrate on drawing from nature, i.e. whether plaster or model, but not without guidance from someone who understands it well. And he, and others too, seriously advised me definitely to go and work at a drawing academy, at least for a while, here or in Antwerp or anywhere I could, so I think I should in fact do something about getting admitted to that drawing academy, although I don't particularly like the idea. *Tuition is free here in Brussels*, I hear that in Amsterdam, for example, it costs 100 guilders a year, and one can work in an adequately heated and lighted room, which is worth thinking about, especially for the winter.

I'm making headway with the examples of Bague, and things are progressing. Moreover, I've recently drawn something that was a lot of work but I'm glad to have done it. Made, in fact, a pen drawing of a skeleton, rather large at that, on 5 sheets of Ingres paper.

- 1 sheet the head, skeleton and muscles
- 1 „ torso, skeleton
- 1 „ hand from the front, skeleton and muscles
- 1 „ „ from the back, „ „
- 1 „ pelvis and legs, skeleton.

I was prompted to do it by a manual written by Zahn, *Esquisses anatomiques à l'usage des artistes*. And it includes a number of other illustrations which seem to me very effective and clear. Of the hand, foot &c. &c.

And what I'm now going to do is complete the drawing of the muscles, i.e. that of the torso and legs, which will form the whole of the human body

with what's already made. Then there's still the body seen from the back and from the side.

So you see that I'm pushing ahead with a vengeance, those things aren't so very easy, and require time and moreover quite a bit of patience.

To be admitted to the drawing academy one must have permission from the mayor and be registered. I'm waiting for an answer to my request.

I know, of course, that no matter how frugally, how poorly even, one lives, it will turn out to be more expensive in Brussels than in Cuesmes, for instance, but I shan't succeed without any guidance, and I think it possible — if I only work hard, which I certainly do — that either Uncle Cent or Uncle Cor will do something, if not as a concession to me at least as a concession to Pa.

It's my plan to get hold of the anatomical illustrations of a horse, cow and sheep, for example, from the veterinary school, and to draw them in the same way as the anatomy of a person.

There are laws of proportion, of light and shadow, of perspective, that one *must know* in order to be able to draw anything at all. If one lacks that knowledge, it will always remain a fruitless struggle and one will never give birth to anything.

That's why I believe I'm steering a straight course by taking matters in hand in this way, and want to try and acquire a wealth of anatomy here this winter, it won't do to wait longer and would ultimately prove to be more expensive because it would be a waste of time.

I believe that this will also be your point of view.

Drawing is a hard and difficult struggle.

If I should be able to find some steady work here, all the better, but I don't dare count on it yet, because I must first learn a great many things.

Also went to see Mr Van Rappard, who now lives at rue Traversière 64, and have spoken to him. He has a fine appearance, I've not seen anything of his work other than a couple of small pen drawings of landscapes. But he lives rather sumptuously and, for financial reasons, I don't know whether he's the person with whom, for instance, I could live and work. But in any case I'll go and see him again. But the impression I got of him was that there appears to be seriousness in him.

In Cuesmes, old boy, I couldn't have stood it a month longer without falling ill with misery. You mustn't think that I live in luxury here, for my food consists mainly of dry bread and some potatoes or chestnuts which

people sell on the street corners, but I'll manage very well with a slightly better room and by eating a slightly better meal from time to time in a restaurant if that were possible. But for nearly 2 years I endured one thing and another in the Borinage, that's no pleasure trip. But it will easily amount to something more than 60 francs and really can't be otherwise. Drawing materials and examples, for instance, for anatomy, it all costs money, and those are certainly essentials, and only in this way can it pay off later, otherwise I'll never succeed.

I had great pleasure lately in reading an extract from the work by Lavater and Gall. *Physiognomie et phrénologie*. Namely character as it is expressed in facial characteristics and the shape of the skull.

Drew The diggers by Millet after a photo by Braun that I found at Schmidt's and which he lent me with that of The evening angelus. I sent both those drawings to Pa so that he could see that I'm doing something.

Write to me again soon. Address 72 *blvd du Midi*. I'm staying in a small boarding-house for 50 francs a month and have my bread and a cup of coffee here, morning, afternoon and evening. That isn't very cheap but it's expensive everywhere here.

The Holbeins from the *Modèles d'après les maitres* are splendid, I notice that now, drawing them, much more than before. But they aren't easy, I assure you.

That Mr Schmidt was entangled in a money matter which would involve the Van Gogh family and for which he, namely Mr S., would be justly prosecuted, I knew not the slightest thing about all that when I went to see him, and I first learned of it from your letter. So that was rather unfortunate, though Mr Schmidt received me quite cordially all the same. Knowing it now, though, and matters being as they are, it would perhaps be wise not to go there often, without it being necessary deliberately to avoid meeting him.

I would have written to you sooner but was too busy with my skeleton.

I believe that the longer you think about it the more you'll see the definite necessity of more artistic surroundings for me, for how is one supposed to learn to draw unless someone shows you? With the best will in the world one cannot succeed without also coming into and remaining in contact with artists who are already further along. Good will is of no avail if there's absolutely no opportunity for development. As regards mediocre artists, to whose ranks you think I should not want to belong, what shall I



say? That depends on what one calls mediocre. I'll do what I can, but in no way do I despise the mediocre in its simple sense. And one certainly doesn't rise above that level by despising that which is mediocre, in my opinion one must at least begin by having some respect for the mediocre as well, and by knowing that that, too, already means something and that one doesn't achieve even that without much effort. Adieu for today, I shake your hand in thought. Write again soon if you can.

Vincent

## **Etten, mid-September 1881**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 172)

My dear Theo,

Even though I wrote to you only a short while ago, this time I have something more to say to you.

Namely that a change has come about in my drawing, both in my manner of doing it and in the result.

Prompted as well by a thing or two that Mauve said to me, I've started working again from a live model. I've been able to get various people here to do it, fortunately, one being Piet Kaufmann the labourer.

The careful study, the constant and repeated drawing of Bague's Exercices au fusain has given me more insight into figure drawing. I've learned to measure and to see and to attempt the broad outlines &c. So that what used to seem to me to be desperately impossible is now gradually becoming possible, thank God. I've drawn a peasant with a spade no fewer than 5 times, 'a digger' in fact, in all kinds of poses, twice a sower, twice a girl with a broom. Also a woman with a white cap who's peeling potatoes, and a shepherd leaning on his crook, and finally an old, sick peasant sitting on a chair by the fireplace with his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees.

And it won't stop there, of course, once a couple of sheep have crossed the bridge the whole flock follows.

Diggers, sowers, ploughers, men and women I must now draw constantly. Examine and draw everything that's part of a peasant's life. Just

as many others have done and are doing. I'm no longer so powerless in the face of nature as I used to be.

I brought Conté in wood (and pencils as well) from The Hague, and am now working a lot with it.

I'm also starting to work with the brush and the stump. With a little sepia or indian ink, and now and then with a bit of colour.

It's quite certain that the drawings I've been making lately don't much resemble anything I've made up till now.

The size of the figures is more or less that of one of the Exercices au fusain.

As regards landscape, I maintain that that should by no means have to suffer on account of it. On the contrary, it will gain by it. Herewith a couple of little sketches to give you an idea of them.

Of course I have to pay the people who pose. Not very much, but because it's an everyday occurrence it will be one more expense as long as I fail to sell any drawings.

But because it's only rarely that a figure is a total failure, it seems to me that the cost of models will be completely recouped fairly soon already.

For there's also something to be earned in this day and age for someone who has learned to seize a figure and hold on to it until it stands firmly on the paper. I needn't tell you that I'm only sending you these sketches to give you an idea of the pose. I scribbled them today quickly and see that the proportions leave much to be desired, certainly more so than in the actual drawings at any rate. I've had a good letter from Rappard who seems to be hard at work, he sent me some very nice sketches of landscapes. I'd really like him to come here again for a few days.

[[sketch A](#)] This is a field or stubble field which is being ploughed and sown, I have a rather large sketch of it with a storm brewing.

[[sketch B](#)] The other two sketches are poses of diggers. I hope to make several more of these.

[[sketches C, D](#)] The other sower has a basket.

It would give me tremendous pleasure to have a woman pose with a seed basket in order to find that figure that I showed you last spring and which you see in the foreground of the first sketch.



De eerste schets is een akker of olappelveld waar men aan 't plagen  
 & zaaien is heb daarvan een ~~op~~ vrij groote schets  
 met opkomend onweer



De twee andere schetsjes zijn poses van arbeiders  
 Ik hoop er daarvan nog verscheiden te maken.



172A–C (top to bottom). *Storm clouds over a field; Digger; Figure of a woman*







172D. *Digger*

[[sketch E](#)] In short, 'the factory is in full swing', as Mauve says.

Remember that Ingres paper, if you will, of the colour of unbleached linen, the stronger kind if possible. In any case, write to me soon if you can, and accept a handshake in thought.

De andere zaaiër heeft een korf.  
 Enorm graag zou ik eens een vrouw laten poseeren  
 met een zaaiërkorf om dat figuurtje te vinden dat ik  
 in 't voorjaar u heb laten zien. en dat ge op den  
 voorgrond van 't eerste schetsje ziet



Enfin zoo als Maure zegt. „de fabriek is in  
 volle werking“.

Als ge wilt en kunt denk dan om het papier Ingres  
 van de kleur van ongebleekt linnen zoo mogelijk  
 het sterkere soort. Schryf my eens spoedig als ge kunt  
 in elk geval, en ontvang een handdruk in dank.

l. ci l.  
 Vincent

172E. *Man leaning on his spade*

Ever yours,  
Vincent

[[sketches F–L](#)]





172F. *Man sitting by the fireplace ('Worn out')*





172G–K (LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM). *Woman near a window; Woman near a window;  
Man with a winnow; Woman with a broom; Sower*





## Etten, Friday, 18 November 1881

To Theo van Gogh (letter 186)

Friday evening.

Dear Brother,

When I sent my letter to you this morning, meaning when I put it in the post-box, I had a feeling of relief. For a moment I'd hesitated, should I tell him or not? But thinking it over later it seemed to me that it really wasn't unwarranted. I'm writing to you here in the little room that's now my studio because the other is so damp. When I look round it's full of all kinds of studies that all relate to one and the same thing, '*Brabant types*'.

So that is work started, and if I were wrenched from this environment I'd have to start all over again doing something else and *this* would come to a standstill, half-finished! That mustn't happen! I've now been working here since May, I'm getting to know and understand my models, my work is progressing, though it's taken a lot of hard work to get into my stride. And now that I've got into my stride, should Pa say, because you're writing letters to Kee Vos, thereby causing difficulties between us (*because this is the fundamental cause*, and no matter what they might say: that I don't obey the 'rules of decorum' or whatever, it's all just idle talk), so because difficulties have arisen I curse you and drive you out of the house.

That's really too bad, after all, and it would indeed be ridiculous to stop working for such a reason on a project that's already started and progressing well.

No, no, one can't just let that happen. Anyway, the difficulties between Pa and Ma and myself aren't so terrible, aren't at all of the kind that would keep us from staying together. But Pa and Ma are getting old, and sometimes they get a little angry, and they have their prejudices and old-fashioned ideas that neither you nor I can share any more.

If, for example, Pa sees me with a French book by Michelet or V. Hugo in my hand, he thinks of arsonists and murderers and 'immorality'. But that's just too silly, and of course I don't let idle talk of that kind upset me. I've already said so often to Pa: just read a book like this, even if only a couple of pages, and you'll be moved by it. *But Pa stubbornly refuses to do so.* Just

now, when this love was taking root in my heart, I read Michelet's books *L'amour* and *La femme* again, and so many things became clear to me that would otherwise remain a mystery. I also told Pa frankly that in the circumstances I valued Michelet's advice more than his, and had to choose which of the two I should follow. But then they come with a story about a great-uncle who had become obsessed with French ideas and had taken to drink, thus insinuating that such will be my career in life. What misery!

Pa and Ma are extremely good to me inasmuch as they do what they can to feed me well &c. I appreciate that very much, but that doesn't alter the fact that eating and drinking and sleeping isn't enough, that one yearns for something nobler and higher, indeed, one simply can't do without it.

That higher thing I can't do without is my love for Kee Vos. Pa and Ma reason, She says no, nay, never, so *you must remain silent*.

I can't accept that at all, on the contrary. And if I write to her or something like that then there are ugly words like 'coercion' and 'it won't help anyway' and 'you'll spoil things for yourself'. And then they're surprised if someone doesn't just resign himself to finding his love 'indelicate'! No, truly not! In my opinion, Theo, I must stay here and quietly go on working and do everything in my power to win Kee Vos's love and to melt the no, nay, never. I can't share Pa and Ma's view that I shouldn't write or speak either to her or to Uncle Stricker; indeed, I feel the exact opposite. And I'd rather give up the work started and all the comforts of this house than resign myself one iota to leaving off writing to her or her parents or you. If Pa curses me for it, then I can't prevent His Hon. from doing so. If he wants to throw me out of the house, so be it, but I'll continue to do what my heart and mind tell me to do with respect to my love.

Be assured, Pa and Ma are actually *against* it, because otherwise I can't explain why they went so far this morning, so it now seems to me that it was a mistake for me ever to think that they didn't care one way or the other. Anyhow, I'm writing to you about it because, where my work is involved, that is definitely your concern, since you're the one who has already spent so much money on helping me to succeed. Now I've got into my stride, now it's progressing, now I'm starting to see something in it, and now I tell you, Theo, this is hanging over me. I'd like nothing better than simply to go on working, but Pa seems to want to curse me and put me out of the house, at least he said so this morning. The reason is that I write letters to Kee Vos. As long as I do that, at any rate, Pa and Ma will always find something to



reproach me with, whether that I don't obey the rules of decorum or that I have an indelicate way of expressing myself or that I'm breaking ties or something of the kind.

A forceful word from you could perhaps straighten things out. *You* will understand what I tell you, that to work and be an artist one needs *love*. At least someone who strives for feeling in his work must first feel and live with his heart.

But Pa and Ma are harder than stone on the point of 'a means of subsistence', as they call it.

If it were a question of marrying at once, I'd most certainly agree with them, but NOW *it's a question of melting the no, nay, never*, and a means of subsistence can't do that.

That's an entirely different matter, an affair of the heart, for to make the no, nay, never melt, *she and I must see each other, write to each other, speak to each other*. That's as clear as day and simple and reasonable. And truly (though they take me to be a weak character, 'a man of butter'), I won't let anything in the world deter me from this love. May God help me in this.

No putting it off from today to tomorrow, from tomorrow to the next day, no *silent* waiting. The lark can't be silent as long as it can sing. It's absurd, utterly absurd, to make someone's life difficult for this reason. If Pa wants to curse me for it, that's his business – my business is to try and see Kee Vos, to speak to her, to write to her, to love her with everything in me.

You'll understand that a father shouldn't curse his son because that son doesn't obey the rules of decorum or expresses himself indelicately or other things, assuming this were all true, though I think it's actually very different.

But unfortunately it's something that happens all too often in many families, that a father curses his son because of a love the parents disapprove of.

THAT'S the rub, the other — rules of decorum &c., expressions, the *tone* of my words — those are just pretexts. What should we do now?

Wouldn't it be foolish, Theo, not to go on drawing those Brabant folk types, now that I'm making progress, just because Pa and Ma are vexed by my love?

No, that mustn't happen. Let them accept it, for God's sake, that's what I think. It really would be mad to expect a young man to sacrifice his energy to the prejudice of an old man. And truly, Pa and Ma are prejudiced in this.

Theo, I still haven't heard one word of love towards *her*, and to tell you the truth *that* is what bothers me more than anything else.

I don't think that Pa and Ma love her deep down, at any rate in the mood they're in *now* they can't think of her with love. But I hope this will change in later and better days. No, no, no, there's something wrong with them, and it can't be good that they curse me and want me out of the house at this very time. There are no grounds for it and it would thwart me in my work. So it can't be allowed to happen for no good reason.

What would *she* think if she knew what happened this morning? How would *she* like it, even though she says no, nay, never, if she heard that they called my love for her indelicate and spoke of 'breaking ties' &c. No, Theo, if she'd heard Pa cursing me, *she* wouldn't have approved of his curse. Ma once called her 'such a poor wee thing' in the sense of so weak, so nervous or whatever.

But be assured that lurking in 'that poor wee thing' is strength of mind and pride, energy and resoluteness that could change the minds of many towards *her*, and I maintain that sooner or later one might see things from '*that poor wee thing*' that very few now expect! She's so good and friendly that it pains her deeply to say one single unfriendly word, but if such as *her*, so gentle, so tender, so loving, rebel — piqued to the quick — then woe betide those they rebel against.

May she not rebel against me, then, dear brother. I think that *she* is beginning to see that I'm not an intruder or bully, but rather quieter and calmer on the inside than I seem on the surface. She didn't realize that immediately. At first, for a time, she really had an unfavourable opinion of me, but lo and behold, I don't know why, while the sky clouds over and darkens with difficulties and curses, light rises up on her side. Pa and Ma have always passed for such gentle, quiet people, so kindly and good. But how can I reconcile that with this morning's scene or that matter of Geel last year?

They really are good and kindly, but even so, they have prejudices they want to impose. And if they want to act as the 'wall of partition' between me and her, I doubt whether it will do them any good.

Now, old chap, if you send me some 'travelling money' you'll soon receive 3 drawings, 'Mealtime', 'the fire-lighter' and 'an almsman'. So send the travelling money, if you can, for the journey won't be completely in vain! If I have but 20 or 30 francs, at least I can see her face once again. And

write a word or two, if you will, about that certain (terrible?) curse and that *banishment*, because I'd like so much to go on working quietly here, that's what I'd like best. I need *her* and *her influence* to reach a higher artistic level, *without* her I am nothing, but *with* her there's a chance. Living, working and loving are actually one and the same thing. Now, adieu with a handshake,

Ever yours,  
Vincent

A word from you 'from Paris'! That would possibly carry some weight, even against prejudices.

That matter of the asylum happened last year 'out of a conscientious conviction', as they call it, now it's another 'conscientious conviction' that's forbidding me to write to Kee Vos. But that's simply a 'conscientious conviction' based on very slight grounds, one that doesn't hold water. No, it can't be allowed to happen for no good reason!

And if one asks Pa, 'Explain to me the basis of your conviction', he answers, 'I don't owe you an explanation', 'it's not fitting to ask your father such a question'. That, however, is no mode of reasoning!

Another mode of reasoning that I don't understand either is Ma's: You know that we've been against it from the beginning, so stop going on about it! No, listen to me, brother, it would really be too bad if I had to leave my field of work here and waste a lot of money elsewhere, where it's much more expensive, instead of gradually earning some 'travelling money'!

That matter of Geel last year, when Pa wanted to have me put in an asylum against my will!!! taught me to be on the *qui vive*. If I didn't watch out now, Pa would 'feel compelled to do' a thing or two.

## **Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 193)

Sometimes, I fear, you throw a book away because it's too realistic. Have compassion and patience with this letter, and read it through, despite its severity.

My dear Theo,

As I already wrote to you from The Hague, I have some things to discuss with you now that I'm back here. It's not without emotion that I look back on my trip to The Hague. When I went to see M. my heart was beating rather hard, because I was thinking to myself, will he too try and fob me off or will I find something else here? And well, what I experienced with him was that he instructed and encouraged me in all manner of kind and practical ways. Though not merely by always approving of everything I did or said, on the contrary. But if he tells me, this or that isn't good, then it's because he's saying at the same time 'but try it this way or that way', and that's entirely different from criticizing for the sake of criticizing. Or if someone says 'you're ill with this or that', that doesn't help much, but if someone says 'do this or that and you'll get better', and his advice isn't deceit, look, that's the real thing, and – and – it naturally helps. Now I've come from him with a few painted studies and a couple of watercolours. Of course they aren't masterpieces and yet I truly believe there's something sound and real in them, more at least than in what I've made up to now. And so I now consider myself to be at the beginning of the beginning of making something serious. And because I now have a few more technical resources at my disposal, namely paint and brush, all things are made new again, as it were.

But – now we have to put it into practice. And the first thing is that I must find a room large enough to be able to take a sufficient distance. Mauve just said to me, when he saw my studies, 'you're too close to your model'.

In many cases this makes it next to impossible to take the necessary measurements for the proportions, so this is certainly one of the first things I have to watch out for. Now I must arrange to rent a large room somewhere, be it a room or a shed. And that won't be so terribly expensive. A labourer's cottage in these parts costs 30 guilders a year to rent, so it seems to me that a room twice as large as that in a labourer's cottage would cost something like 60 guilders.

And that isn't insurmountable. I've already seen a shed, though it has too many inconveniences, especially in the winter. But I'd be able to work there, at least when the weather is milder. And here in Brabant, moreover, there are models to be found, I believe, not only in Etten but also in other villages, if difficulties were to arise here.

Still, though I love Brabant very much, I also have a feeling for other figures than the Brabant peasant types. Scheveningen, for example, I again

found unspeakably beautiful. But after all I'm here, and it would very probably be cheaper to stay here. However, I've definitely promised M. that I'll do my utmost to find a good studio, and now I must also use better paint and better paper.

Nevertheless, Ingres paper is excellent for studies and scratches. And it's much cheaper to make sketchbooks in all formats from it oneself than to buy ready-made sketchbooks. I still have a small supply of Ingres paper, but you'd be doing me a big favour if you could send some more of the same kind when you send back those studies. Not pure white, though, but the colour of unbleached linen, no *cold* shades.

Theo, what a great thing tone and colour are! And anyone who doesn't acquire a feeling for it, how far removed from life he will remain! M. has taught me to see so many things I didn't see before, and when I have the opportunity I'll try and tell you about what he's told me, because perhaps there are still one or two things that you don't see properly either. Anyway, we'll talk about artistic matters sometime, I hope.

And you can't imagine the feeling of relief I'm beginning to get when I think of the things M. said to me about earning money. Just think of how I've slogged away for years, always in a kind of false position. And now, now there's a glimmer of real light.

I do wish that you could see the two watercolours I've brought with me, because you would see that they're watercolours just like any other watercolours. There may be many imperfections in them, be that as it may, I'd be the first to say that I'm still very dissatisfied with them, and yet, it's different from what I've done up to now, and it looks fresher and sounder. All the same, it must become much fresher and sounder, but one can't do what one wants all at once. It comes gradually. I need those couple of drawings myself, however, to compare with what I'll be making here, because I have to do them *at least* as well as what I did at M.'s.

But even though Mauve tells me that if I continue to slog away here for a couple of months and then go back to him again in March, for instance, I'll then be able to make saleable drawings on a regular basis, I'm nevertheless going through a rather difficult period. The cost of models, studio, drawing and painting materials are multiplying, and there are no earnings as yet.

Admittedly, Pa said that I needn't be afraid of the inevitable expense, and Pa is pleased with what M. himself said to him, and also with the studies and drawings I brought back. But I do find it utterly, utterly wretched that Pa



should suffer by it. Of course we hope that things will turn out well later, but still, it weighs heavily on my heart. Because since I've been here Pa really hasn't profited from me, and more than once he's bought a coat or trousers, for example, which I'd actually rather not have had, even though I really needed it, but Pa shouldn't suffer by it. The more so if the coat and trousers in question don't fit and are only half or not at all what I need. Anyway, still more petty vexations of human life. And, as I've told you before, I find it absolutely terrible not to be free at all. Because even though Pa doesn't ask me to account for literally every penny, still, he always knows exactly how much I spend and what I spend it on. And now, although I don't necessarily have any secrets, I don't really like people being able to look at my cards. Even my secrets aren't necessarily secrets to those for whom I feel sympathy.

But Pa isn't the kind of man for whom I can feel what I feel for you, for example, or for Mauve. I really do love Pa and Ma, but it's a very different feeling from what I feel for you or Mauve. Pa cannot empathize or sympathize with me, and I cannot settle in to Pa and Ma's routine, it's too constricting for me — it would suffocate me.

Whenever I tell Pa anything, it's all just idle talk to him, and certainly no less so to Ma, and I also find Pa and Ma's sermons and ideas about God, people, morality, virtue, almost complete nonsense. I also read the Bible sometimes, just as I sometimes read Michelet or Balzac or Eliot, but I see completely different things in the Bible than Pa sees, and I can't agree at all with what Pa makes of it in his petty, academic way. Since the Rev. Ten Kate translated Goethe's Faust, Pa and Ma have read that book, because now that a clergyman has translated it, it can't be all that immoral (??? what is that?). Yet they don't see anything in it but the catastrophic consequences of an unchaste love.

And they certainly understand the Bible just as little. Take Mauve, for instance, when he reads something deep he doesn't immediately say, that man means this or that. Because poetry is so deep and intangible that one can't simply define it all systematically, but Mauve has a refined sensibility and, you see, I find that sensibility to be worth so much more than definition and criticism. And oh, when I read, and I actually don't read so much and even then, only one-and-a-half writers, a couple of men whom I accidentally found, then I do so because they look at things more broadly and milder and with more love than I do, and are better acquainted with reality, and because

I can learn something from them. But all that drivel about good and evil, morality and immorality, I actually care so little about it. For truly, it's impossible for me always to know what is good, what is evil, what is moral, what is immoral.

Morality or immorality coincidentally brings me to K.V. Ah! I'd written to you that it was beginning to seem less and less like eating strawberries in the spring. Well, that is of course true. If I should lapse into repetition, forgive me, I don't know if I've already written to you about what happened to me in Amsterdam. I went there thinking, who knows whether the no, nay, never isn't thawing, it's such mild weather. And so one evening I was making my way along Keizersgracht, looking for the house, and indeed found it. And naturally I rang the bell and heard that the family were still at table. But then I heard that I could come in all the same. And there they were, including Jan, the very learned professor, all of them except Kee. And they all still had a plate in front of them, and there wasn't a plate too many. This small detail caught my eye. They wanted to make me think that Kee wasn't there, and had taken away her plate, but I knew she was there, I thought it so much like a comedy or game.

After a while I asked (after chatting a bit and greeting everyone), But where's Kee? Then J.P.S. repeated my question, saying to his wife, Mother, where's Kee? And the missus said, Kee's out. And for the time being I didn't pursue the matter but talked a bit with the professor about the exhibition at Arti he'd just seen. Well, the professor disappeared and little Jan Vos disappeared, and J.P.S. and the wife of the same and yours truly remained alone and got ourselves into position. J.P.S., as priest and Father, started to speak and said he'd been on the point of sending a certain letter to yours truly and he would read that letter aloud. However, first I asked again, interrupting His Hon. or the Rev., Where's Kee? (Because I knew she was in town.) Then J.P.S. said, Kee left the house as soon as she heard you were here. Well, I know some things about her, and I must say that I didn't know then and still don't know with certainty whether her coldness and rudeness is a good or bad sign. This much I do know, that I've never seen her so seemingly or actually cool and callous and rude towards anyone but me. So I didn't say much in reply and remained dead calm. Let me hear that letter, I said, or not, I don't really care either way. Then came the epistle. The writing was reverent and very learned and so there wasn't really anything in it, though it did seem to say that I was being requested to stop corresponding

and I was given the advice to make vigorous attempts to forget the matter. At last the reading of the letter was over. I felt exactly as though I were hearing the minister in the church, after some raising and lowering of his voice, saying amen – it left me just as cold as an ordinary sermon. And then I began, and I said as calmly and politely as I could, well yes, I've already heard this line of reasoning quite often, but now go on – and after that? But then J.P.S. looked up... he even seemed to be somewhat amazed at my not being completely convinced that we'd reached the extreme limit of the human capacity to think and feel. There was, according to him, no 'after that' possible. We went on like this, and once in a while Aunt M. put in a very Jesuitical word, and I got quite warm and finally lost my temper. And J.P.S. lost his temper too, as much as a clergyman can lose his temper. And even though he didn't exactly say 'God damn you', anyone other than a clergyman in J.P.S.'s mood would have expressed himself that way. But you know that I love both Pa and J.P.S. in my own way, despite the fact that I truly loathe their system, and I changed tack a bit and gave and took a bit, so that at the end of the evening they said to me that if I wanted to stay at their house I could. Then I said, thank you. If Kee walks out of the house when I come, then I don't think it's the right moment to stay here, I'm going to my boarding-house. And then they asked, where are you staying? I said, I don't know yet, and then Uncle and Aunt insisted on bringing me themselves to a good, inexpensive boarding-house. And heavens, those two old dears came with me through the cold, misty, muddy streets, and truly, they showed me a very good boarding-house and very inexpensive. I didn't want them to come at all but they insisted on showing me. And, you see, I thought that rather humane of them and it calmed me down somewhat. I stayed in Amsterdam two more days and talked with J.P.S. again, but I didn't see Kee, she made herself scarce each time. And I said that they ought to know that although they wanted me to consider the matter over and done with, I couldn't bring myself to do it. And they continued to reply firmly: 'Later on I would understand it better'. Now and then I also saw the professor again, and I have to say he wasn't so bad, but – but – but – what else can I say about that gentleman? I said I hoped that he might fall in love one day. Voilà. Can professors fall in love? Do clergymen know what love is?

I recently read Michelet, *La femme, la religion et le prêtre*. Books like that are full of reality, yet what is more real than reality itself, and what has

more life than life itself? And we who do our best to live, why don't we live even more!

I walked around aimlessly those three days in Amsterdam, I felt damned miserable, and that half-kindness on the part of Uncle and Aunt and all those arguments, I found them so tedious. Until I finally began to find myself tedious and said to myself: would you like to become despondent again? And then I said to myself, Don't let yourself be overwhelmed. And so it was on a Sunday morning that I last went to see J.P.S. and said to him, Listen, my dear Uncle, if Kee Vos were an angel she would be too lofty for me, and I don't think that I would stay in love with an angel. Were she a devil, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with her. In the present case, I see in her a real woman, with womanly passions and whims, and I love her dearly, that's just the way it is, and I'm glad of it. So long as she doesn't become an angel or a devil, the case in question isn't over. And J.P.S. couldn't say very much to that, and spoke himself of womanly passions, I'm not really sure what he said about them, and then J.P.S. left for the church. No wonder one becomes hardened and numb there, I know that from my own experience. And so as far as your brother in question is concerned, he didn't want to let himself be overwhelmed. But that didn't alter the fact that he felt overwhelmed, that he felt as though he had been leaning against a cold, hard, whitewashed church wall for too long. Oh well, should I tell you more, old chap? It's rather daring to remain a realist, but Theo, Theo, you too are a realist, oh bear with my realism! I told you, even my secrets aren't necessarily secrets. Well, I won't take those words back, think of me as you will, and whether you approve or disapprove of what I did is less important.

I'll continue – from Amsterdam I went to Haarlem and sat very agreeably with our dear sister Willemien, and I took a walk with her, and in the evening I went to The Hague, and I landed up at M.'s around seven o'clock.

And I said: listen M., you were supposed to come to Etten to try and initiate me, more or less, into the mysteries of the palette. But I've been thinking that that wouldn't be possible in only a couple of days, so now I've come to you and if you approve I'll stay four weeks or so, or six weeks or so, or as long or as short as you like, and we'll just have to see what we can do. It's extremely impertinent of me to demand so much of you, but in short, I'm under a great deal of pressure. Well, Mauve said, do you have anything with you? Certainly, here are a couple of studies, and he said many good

things about them, far too many, at the same time voicing some criticism, far too little. Well, and the next day we set up a still life and he began by saying, This is how you should hold your palette. And since then I've made a few painted studies and after that two watercolours.

This is a summary of my work, but there's more to life than working with the hands and the head.

I remained chilled to the marrow, that's to say to the marrow of my soul by that aforementioned imaginary or not-imaginary church wall. And I didn't want to let myself be overwhelmed by that deadening feeling, I said. Then I thought to myself, I'd like to be with a woman, I can't live without love, without a woman. I wouldn't care a fig for life if there wasn't something infinite, something deep, something real. But, I said to myself in reply: you say 'She and no other' and should you go to a woman? But surely that's unreasonable, surely that goes against logic? And my answer to that was, Who's the master, logic or I? Is logic there for me or am I there for logic, and is there no reason and no understanding in my unreasonableness or my stupidity? And whether I act rightly or wrongly, I can't do otherwise, that damned wall is too cold for me, I'll look for a woman, I cannot, I will not, I may not live without love. I'm only human, and a human with passions at that, I need a woman or I'll freeze or turn to stone, or anyway be overwhelmed. In the circumstances, however, I struggled much within myself, and in that struggle some things concerning physical powers and health gained the upper hand, things which I believe and know more or less through bitter experience. One doesn't live too long without a woman without going unpunished. And I don't think that what some call God and others the supreme being and others nature is unreasonable and merciless, and, in a word, I came to the conclusion, I must see whether I can't find a woman. And heavens, I didn't look so very far. I found a woman, by no means young, by no means pretty, with nothing special about her, if you will. But perhaps you're rather curious. She was fairly big and strongly built, she didn't exactly have lady's hands like K.V. but those of a woman who works hard. But she was not coarse and not common, and had something very feminine about her. She slightly resembled a nice figure by Chardin or Frère or possibly Jan Steen. Anyhow, that which the French call 'a working woman'. She'd had a great many cares, one could see that, and life had given her a drubbing, oh nothing distinguished, nothing exceptional, nothing out of the ordinary.



Every woman, at every age, if she loves and if she is kind, can give a man not the infinite of the moment but the moment of the infinite.

Theo, I find such infinite charm in that *je ne sais quoi* of withering, that drubbed by life quality. Ah! I found her to have a charm, I couldn't help seeing in her something by Feyen-Perrin, by Perugino. Look, I'm not exactly as innocent as a greenhorn, let alone a child in the cradle. It's not the first time I couldn't resist that feeling of affection, particularly love and affection for those women whom the clergymen damn so and superciliously despise and condemn from the pulpit. I don't damn them, I don't condemn them, I don't despise them. Look, I'm almost thirty years old, and do you think I've never felt the need for love?

K.V. is older than I am, she also has love behind her, but she's all the dearer to me for that very reason. She's not ignorant, but neither am I. If she wants to subsist on an old love and if she wants to know nothing of new ones, that's her business, but the more she perseveres in that and avoids me, the more I can't just stifle my energy and strength of mind for her sake. No, I don't want that, I love her, but I don't want to freeze and deaden my mind for her sake. And the stimulus, the spark of fire we need, that is love and I don't exactly mean mystic love.

That woman didn't cheat me – oh, anyone who thinks all those sisters are swindlers is so wrong and understands so little.

That woman was good to me, very good, very decent, very sweet. In what way? That I won't repeat even to my brother Theo, because I strongly suspect my brother Theo of having experienced something of this himself now and then. The better for him.

Did we spend a lot together? No, because I didn't have much and I said to her, listen, you and I don't have to get drunk to feel something for one another, just pocket what I can afford. And I wish I could have afforded more, because she was worth it.

And we talked about all kinds of things, about her life, about her cares, about her destitution, about her health, and I had a livelier conversation with her than with my learned professorial cousin Jan Stricker, for instance.

I've actually told you these things because I hope you'll see that even though I perhaps have some feeling, I don't want to be sentimental in a senseless way. That, no matter what, I want to preserve some warmth of life and keep my mind clear and my body healthy in order to work. And that I

understand my love for K.V. to be such that for her sake I don't want to set about my work despondently or let myself get upset.

You'll understand that, you who wrote in your letter something about the matter of health. You talk of having been not quite healthy a while back, it's very good you're trying to get yourself straightened out.

Clergymen call us sinners, conceived and born in sin. Bah! I think that damned nonsense. Is it a *sin* to love, to need love, not to be able to do without love? I consider a life without love a sinful condition and an immoral condition. If there's anything I regret, it's that for a time I let mystical and theological profundities seduce me into withdrawing too much inside myself. I've gradually stopped doing that. If you wake up in the morning and you're not alone and you see in the twilight a fellow human being, it makes the world so much more agreeable. Much more agreeable than the edifying journals and whitewashed church walls the clergymen are in love with. It was a sober, simple little room she lived in, with a subdued, grey tone because of the plain wallpaper and yet as warm as a painting by Chardin, a wooden floor with a mat and an old piece of dark-red carpet, an ordinary kitchen stove, a chest of drawers, a large, perfectly simple bed, in short, a real working woman's interior. She had to do the washing the next day. Just right, very good, I would have found her just as charming in a purple jacket and a black skirt as now in a brown or red-grey frock. And she was no longer young, perhaps the same age as K.V., and she had a child, yes, life had given her a drubbing and her youth was gone. Gone? – there is no such thing as an old woman. Ah, and she was strong and healthy – and yet not rough, not common. Those who value distinction so very highly, can they always tell what is distinguished? Heavens! People sometimes look for it high and low when it's close by, as I do too now and then.

I'm glad that I did what I did, because I think that nothing in the world should keep me from my work or cause me to lose my good spirits.

When I think of K.V., I still say 'she and no other', and I think exactly the same as I did last summer about 'meanwhile looking for another lass'. But it's not only recently that I've grown fond of those women who are condemned and despised and cursed by clergymen, my love for them is even somewhat older than my love for Kee Vos. Whenever I walked down the street – often all alone and at loose ends, half sick and destitute, with no money in my pocket – I looked at them and envied the people who could go off with her, and I felt as though those poor girls were my sisters, as far as

our circumstances and experience of life were concerned. And, you see, that feeling is old and deeply rooted in me. Even as a boy I sometimes looked up with endless sympathy and respect into a half-withered female face on which it was written, as it were: life and reality have given me a drubbing. But my feelings for K.V. are completely new and something entirely different. Without knowing it, she's in a kind of prison. She's also poor and can't do everything she wants, and you see, she has a kind of resignation and I think that the Jesuitisms of clergymen and devout ladies often make more of an impression on her than on me, Jesuitisms that no longer impress me for the very reason that I've learned a few tricks. But she adheres to them and couldn't bear it if the system of resignation and sin and God and whatnot appeared to be a conceit. And I don't think it occurs to her that perhaps *God* only actually begins when we say those words with which Multatuli closes his prayer of an unbeliever: 'O God, there is no God'. Look, I find the clergymen's God as dead as a doornail. But does that make me an atheist? The clergymen think me one – be that as it may – but look, I love, and how could I feel love if I myself weren't alive and others weren't alive? And if we live, there's something wondrous about it. Call it God or human nature or what you will, but there's a certain something that I can't define in a system, even though it's very much alive and real, and you see, for me it's God or just as good as God. Look, if I must die in due course in one way or another, fine, what would there be to keep me alive? Wouldn't it be the thought of love (moral or immoral love, what do I know about it?). And heavens, I love Kee Vos for a thousand reasons, but precisely because I believe in life and in something real I no longer become distracted as I used to when I had thoughts about God and religion that were more or less similar to those Kee Vos now appears to have. I won't give her up, but that inner crisis she's perhaps going through will take time, and I have the patience for it, and nothing she says or does makes me angry. But as long as she goes on being attached to the past and clinging to it, I must work and keep my mind clear for painting and drawing and business. So I did what I did, from a need for warmth of life and with an eye to health. I'm also telling you these things so that you don't get the idea again that I'm in a melancholy or distracted, pensive mood. On the contrary, I'm usually pottering about with and thinking about paint, making watercolours, looking for a studio &c. &c. Old chap, if only I could find a suitable studio.

Well, my letter has grown long, but anyway.

I sometimes wish that the three months between now and going back to M. were already over, but such as they'll be, they'll bring some good. Write to me, though, now and then. Are you coming again in the winter?

And listen, renting a studio &c., I'll do it or I won't, depending on what Mauve thinks of it. I'm sending him the floor plan as agreed, and perhaps he'll come and have a look himself if necessary. But Pa has to stay out of it. Pa isn't the right man to get mixed up in artistic matters. And the less I have to do with Pa in business matters, the better I'll get along with Pa. But I have to be free and independent in many things, that goes without saying.

I sometimes shudder at the thought of K.V., seeing her dwelling on the past and clinging to old, dead notions. There's something fatal about it, and oh, she'd be none the worse for changing her mind. I think it quite possible that her reaction will come, there's so much in her that's healthy and lively. And so in March I'll go to The Hague again and – and – again to Amsterdam. But when I left Amsterdam this time, I said to myself, under no circumstances should you become melancholy and let yourself be overwhelmed so that your work suffers, especially now that it's beginning to progress. Eating strawberries in the spring, yes, that's part of life, but it's only a short part of the year and it's still a long way off.

And you should envy me because of this or that? Oh no, old chap, because what I'm seeking can be found by all, by you perhaps sooner than by me. And oh, I'm so backward and narrow-minded about so many things, if only I knew exactly why and what I should do to improve. But unfortunately we often don't see the beams in our own eye. Do write to me soon, and you'll just have to separate the wheat from the chaff in my letters, if sometimes there's something good in them, something true, so much the better, but of course there's much in them that's wrong, more or less, or perhaps exaggerated, without my always being aware of it. I'm truly no scholar and am so extremely ignorant, oh, like many others and even more than others, but I can't gauge that myself, and I can gauge others even less than I can gauge myself, and am often wide of the mark. But even as we stray we sometimes find the track anyway, and there's something good in all movement (by the way, I happened to hear Jules Breton say that and have remembered that utterance of his). Tell me, have you ever heard Mauve preach?? I've heard him imitate several clergymen – once he gave a sermon on Peter's barque (the sermon was divided into 3 parts: First, would he have bought it or inherited it? Second, would he have paid for it in instalments or

parts? Third, did he perhaps (banish the thought) steal it?) Then he went on to preach on 'the goodness of the Lord' and on 'the Tigris and the Euphrates' and finally he did an imitation of J.P.S., how he had married A. and Lecomte.

But when I told him that I had once said in a conversation with Pa that I believed that one could say something edifying even in church, even from the pulpit, M. said, Yes. And then he did an imitation of Father Bernhard: God – God – is almighty – he created the sea, he created the earth and the sky and the stars and the sun and the moon, he can do everything – everything – everything – and yet – no, He's not almighty, there's one thing He cannot do. What is the one thing that God Almighty cannot do? God Almighty cannot cast away a sinner. Well, adieu, Theo, do write soon, in thought a handshake, believe me

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **The Hague, Thursday, 26 January 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 203)

Schenkweg 138 Thursday.

My dear Theo,

I received your letter and the 100 francs enclosed in good order, and thank you very much for both. What I feared would happen when last I wrote to you has now truly come about, namely that I fell ill and spent three days or so lying in bed with fever and anxiety. Accompanied now and then by headache and toothache. It's a wretched condition and comes from nervous exhaustion. Mauve came to see me and we agreed again to bear up bravely through it all.

But then I loathe myself so much for not being able to do what I'd like, and at such moments one feels as though one is bound hand and foot, lying in a deep, dark pit, powerless to do anything. Now it's over, inasmuch as I got up last night and pottered around a bit, putting one thing and another in order, and when this morning the model came of her own accord to have a look, even though I only half expected her, together with Mauve I arranged her in a pose and tried to draw a little, but I can't yet, and this evening I felt



completely weak and miserable. But if I do as little as possible for a couple of days then it will be over for a good long time, and if I'm careful I needn't be afraid that it will recur for the time being. I'm very sorry that you're not well either. When I was in Brussels last winter, I had baths as often as I could, 2 or 3 times a week in the bathhouse, and I felt very well and shall start doing it again here. I don't doubt but that it would also help you a lot if you were to keep it up for a while, because one gets what they call 'radiation' here, namely that the pores of the skin stay open and the skin can breathe, whereas otherwise it shrivels up a bit, especially in the winter.

And I tell you frankly that I definitely think you mustn't be embarrassed about going to a girl now and then, if you know one you can trust and you can feel something for, of which there are many in fact. Because for someone whose life is all hard work and exertion it's necessary, absolutely necessary, to stay normal and to keep one's wits about one.

One doesn't have to overdo that kind of thing and go to excess, but nature has fixed laws and it's fatal to struggle against them. Anyway, you know everything you need to know about it.

It would be good for you, it would be good for me, if we were married, but what can one do?

I'm sending you a little drawing, but you mustn't conclude from it that they're all like that, this is fairly thin and washed quickly, but that doesn't always work, especially with larger ones, in fact it seldom does.

Yet it will perhaps prove to you that it's not a hopeless case, that I'm beginning to get the hang of it, rather.

When Mauve was last here he asked me if I needed any money. I could put on a brave face towards him and that's going better, but you see that in an emergency he would also do something.

And so, although there will still be worries, I do have hope that we'll muddle through. Especially if Mr Tersteeg would be kind enough, if it's inconvenient for you, to give me some credit if it should prove absolutely necessary.

You speak of *fine promises*. It's more or less the same with me. Mauve says it will go well, but that doesn't alter the fact that the watercolours I'm making still aren't exactly saleable. Well, I also have hope and I'll work myself to the bone, but one is sometimes driven to desperation when one wants to work something up a bit more and it turns out thick. It's enough to drive one to distraction, for it's no small difficulty. And experiments and

trials with watercolours are rather costly. Paper, paint, brushes and the model and time and all the rest.

Still, I believe that the least expensive way is to persevere without losing any time.

For one *must* get through this miserable period. Now I must learn not to do some things which I more or less taught myself, and to look at things in a completely different way. A great effort must be made before one can look at the proportion of things with a steady eye.

It's not exactly easy for me to get along with Mauve all the time, any more than is the reverse, because I think we're a match for each other as regards nervous energy, and it's a downright effort for him to give me directions, and no less for me to understand them and to attempt to put them into practice.

But I think we're beginning to understand each other quite well, and it's already beginning to be a deeper feeling than mere superficial sympathy. He has his hands full with his large painting that was once intended for the Salon, it will be splendid. And he's also working on a winter scene. And some lovely drawings.

I believe he puts a little bit of his life into each painting and each drawing. Sometimes he's dog-tired, and he said recently, 'I'm not getting any stronger', and anyone seeing him just then wouldn't easily forget the expression on his face.

This is what Mauve says to console me when my drawings turn out heavy, thick, muddy, black, dead: If you were already working thinly *now*, it would only be being stylish and *later* your work would probably become thick. Now, though, you're struggling and it becomes heavy, but later it will become quick and thin. If indeed it turns out like that, I have nothing against it. And you see it now from this small one, which took a quarter of an hour to make from beginning to end, but – after I'd made a larger one that turned out too heavy. And it was precisely because I'd struggled with that other one that, when the model happened to be standing like this for a moment, I was later able to sketch this one in an instant on a little piece of paper that was left over from a sheet of Whatman.

This model is a pretty girl, I believe she's mainly Artz's model, but she charges a *daalder* a day and that's really too expensive for now. So I simply toil on with my old crone.

The success or failure of a drawing also has a lot to do with one's mood and condition, I believe. And that's why I do what I can to stay clear-headed and cheerful. But sometimes, like now, some malaise or other takes hold of me, and then it doesn't work at all.

But then, too, the message is to keep on working – because Mauve, for instance, and Israëls and so many others who are examples know how to benefit from every mood.

Anyway, I have some hope that as soon as I'm completely better things will go well, a little better than now. If I have to rest for a while I'll do it, but it will probably be over soon.

All things considered, though, I'm not like I was a year or so ago, when I never had to stay in bed for a day, and now there's something thwarting me at every turn, even if it isn't so bad.

In short, my youth is past, not my love of life or my vitality, but I mean the time when one doesn't feel that one lives, and lives without effort. Actually I say all the better, there are now better things, after all, than there were then. Bear up, old chap – it really is rather petty and mean of Messrs G&Cie that they refused you when you wanted to have some money. You certainly didn't deserve that, that they were so cold-hearted towards you, because you do a lot of their dirty work and don't spare yourself. So you have a right to be treated with some respect.

Accept a handshake in thought, I hope that I'll soon have something better to tell you than I did today and recently, but you mustn't hold it against me, I'm very weak. Adieu.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **The Hague, Saturday, 11 March 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 211)

My dear Theo,

You will have received my letters, I'm answering yours, received this afternoon. In accordance with your request, I immediately sent Tersteeg 10 guilders, lent to me this week by His Hon. I wrote to you about C.M.'s order,

this is what happened. C.M. appeared to have spoken to Tersteeg before he came to see me, at any rate began talking about things like ‘earning your bread’. My answer suddenly came to me, quickly and, I believe, correctly. Here’s what I said: earn my bread, what do you mean by that? — to earn one’s bread or to deserve one’s bread — not to deserve one’s bread, that is to say, to be unworthy of one’s bread, that’s what’s a crime, every honest man being worthy of his crust — but as for not earning it at all, while at the same time deserving it, oh, that! is a misfortune and A great misfortune. So, if you’re saying to me here and now: you’re unworthy of your bread, I understand that you’re insulting me, but if you’re making the moderately fair comment to me that I don’t always earn it because sometimes I’m short of it, so be it, but what’s the use of making that comment to me? It’s scarcely useful to me if it ends there. I recently tried, I continued, to explain this to Tersteeg, but either he’s hard of hearing in that ear or my explanation was a little confused because of the pain his words caused me.

C.M. then kept quiet about earning one’s bread.

The storm threatened again because I happened to mention the name Degroux in connection with expression. C.M. suddenly asked, But surely you know there was something untoward about Degroux’s private life?

You understand that there C.M. touched a tender spot and ventured on to thin ice. I really can’t let that be said about good *père* Degroux. So I replied, it has always seemed to me that when an artist shows his work to people he has the right to keep to himself the inner struggle of his own private life (which is directly and inextricably connected with the singular difficulties involved in producing a work of art) – unless he unburdens himself to a very intimate friend. It is, I say, indelicate for a critic to dig up something blameworthy from the private life of someone whose work is above criticism. Degroux is a master like Millet, like Gavarni.

C.M. had certainly not viewed Gavarni, at least, as a master.

(To anyone but C.M. I could have expressed myself more succinctly by saying: an artist’s work and his private life are like a woman in childbed and her child. You may look at her child, but you may not lift up her chemise to see if there are any bloodstains on it, that would be indelicate on the occasion of a maternity visit.)

I was already beginning to fear that C.M. would hold it against me – but fortunately things took a turn for the better. As a diversion I got out my portfolio with smaller studies and sketches. At first he said nothing – until

we came to a little drawing that I'd sketched once with Breitner, parading around at midnight – namely Paddemoes (that Jewish quarter near the Nieuwe Kerk), seen from Turfmarkt. I'd set to work on it again the next morning with the pen.

Jules Bakhuyzen had also looked at the thing and recognized the spot immediately.

Could you make more of those townscapes for me? said C.M. Certainly, because I amuse myself with them sometimes when I've worked myself to the bone with the model – here's Vleersteeg – the Geest district – Vischmarkt. Make 12 of those for me. Certainly, I said, but that means we're doing a bit of business, so let's talk straightaway about the price. My price for a drawing of that size, whether with pencil or pen, I've fixed for myself at a *rijksdaalder* – does that seem unreasonable to you?

No – he simply says – if they turn out well I'll ask for another 12 of Amsterdam, provided you let me fix the price, then you'll earn a bit more.

Well, it seems to me that that's not a bad way to end a visit I had rather dreaded. Because I actually made an agreement with you, Theo, simply to tell you things like this in my own way, as it flows from my pen, I'm describing these little scenes to you just as they happen. Especially because in this way, even though you're absent, you get a glimpse of my studio anyway.

I'm longing for you to come, because then I can talk to you more seriously about things concerning home, for instance.

C.M.'s order is a bright spot! I'll try to do those drawings carefully and put some spirit into them. And in any case you'll see them, and I believe, old chap, that there's more of such business. Buyers for 5-franc drawings can be found. With a bit of practice, I'll make one every day and voilà, if they sell well, a crust of bread and a guilder a day for the model. The lovely season with long days is approaching, I'll make the 'soup ticket', i.e. the bread and model drawing, either in the morning or the evening, and during the day I'll study seriously from the model. C.M. is one buyer I found myself. Who knows whether you won't succeed in turning up a second, and perhaps Tersteeg, when he's recovered from his reproachful fury, a third, and then things can move along.

Tomorrow morning I'll go and look for a subject for one of those for C.M.



I was at Pulchri this evening – Tableaux vivants and a kind of farce by Tony Offermans. I skipped the farce, because I can't stand caricatures or the fug of an assembly hall, but I wanted to see the tableaux vivants, especially because one of them was done after an etching I gave Mauve as a present, Nicolaas Maes, the stable at Bethlehem. (The other was Rembrandt, Isaac blessing Jacob, with a superb Rebecca who watches to see if her ruse will succeed.) The Nicolaas Maes was very good in chiaroscuro and even colour – but in my opinion not worth tuppence as far as expression goes. The expression was definitely wrong. I saw it once in real life, not the birth of the baby Jesus, mind you, but the birth of a calf. And I still know exactly what its expression was like. There was a girl there, at night in that stable – in the Borinage – a brown peasant face with a white night-cap among other things, she had tears in her eyes of compassion for the poor cow when the animal went into labour and was having great difficulty. It was pure, holy, wonderfully beautiful like a Correggio, like a Millet, like an Israëls. Oh Theo – why don't you let it all go hang and become a painter? Old chap – you could do it if you wanted to. I sometimes suspect you of keeping a great landscapist hidden inside you. It seems to me you'd be extremely good at drawing birch trunks and sketching the furrows of a field or stubble field, and painting snow and sky &c. Just between you and me. I shake your hand.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

Here's a list of Dutch paintings intended for the Salon.

*Israëls*, an old man (if he weren't a fisherman he'd be Tom Carlyle – the author of the French Revolution and Oliver Cromwell – for he definitely has that distinctive head of Carlyle), an old man sits in a hut by the fireplace in which a small piece of peat barely glows in the twilight. For it's a dark hut the old man sits in, an old hut with a small window with a little white curtain. His dog, who's grown old with him, sits beside him – those two old creatures look at each other, they look each other in the eye, the dog and the old man. And meanwhile the man takes his tobacco box out of his trousers pocket and he fills his pipe like that in the twilight. Nothing else – the twilight, the quiet, the loneliness of those two old creatures, man and dog, the familiarity of those two, that old man thinking – what's he thinking about? – I don't know – I can't say – but it must be a deep, a long thought, something, though I don't know what, surfacing from long ago, perhaps

that's what gives that expression to his face – a melancholy, satisfied, submissive expression, something that recalls that famous verse by Longfellow that always ends, But the thoughts of youth are long long thoughts. I'd like to see that painting by Israëls as a pendant to Millet's Death and the woodcutter. I definitely know of no other painting than this Israëls that can stand up to Millet's Death and the woodcutter, that one can see at the same time, on the other hand I know of no other painting that could stand up to this Israëls than Millet's Death and the woodcutter, no other painting that one can see at the same time as this Israëls. Moreover, I feel in my mind an irresistible desire to bring together that painting by Israëls and that other by Millet and make them complement each other. It seems to me that what this Israëls lacks is having Millet's Death and the woodcutter hanging close by, one at one end and the other at the other end of a long, narrow room, with no other painting in that gallery but those two and them alone.

It's a fabulous Israëls, I couldn't really see anything else, it made such a deep impression on me. And yet, there was another Israëls, a small one with 5 or 6 figures, I think, a labourer's family at table.

There's a Mauve, the large painting of the pink being dragged onto the dunes, it's a masterpiece.

I've never heard a good sermon about resignation nor been able to imagine one, except for this painting by Mauve and the work of Millet. It is indeed *resignation*, but the true kind, not that of the clergymen. Those nags, those poor, sorry-looking nags, black, white, brown, they stand there, patiently submissive, willing, resigned, still. They'll soon have to drag the heavy boat the last bit of the way, the job's almost done. They stand still for a moment, they pant, they're covered in sweat, but they don't murmur, they don't protest – they don't complain – about anything. They're long past that, years ago already. They're resigned to living and working a while longer, but if they have to go to the knacker's yard tomorrow, so be it, they're ready for it. I find such a wonderfully elevated, practical, wordless philosophy in this painting, it seems to be saying,

to know how to suffer without complaining, that's the only practical thing, that's the great skill, the lesson to learn, the solution to life's problem.

It seems to me that this painting by Mauve would be one of those rare paintings which Millet would stand in front of for a long time, mumbling to

himself, he has a good heart, that painter.

There were other paintings – I must say I scarcely looked at them, I had enough with the above-mentioned.

Listen Theo, wouldn't you like to ponder whether there's not a great landscapist in you? We should both of us quite simply become painters, we'd be able to make a living at it. For the figure one must be more of a draught ox or work-horse, more a man of hard labour. There's a long long thought for you – old boy.

Theo, remain something better than HGT. When I first got to know him, HGT was better than now, he'd been a bigwig only a short time and was newly married. Now he's been caught, he's trapped. He'll grow more and more to have secret regrets about many, many things and will be forced to conceal them. The thing is, Theo, my brother, not to let your hands be tied by anyone, especially not with a gilt chain. I have to say that the chain tying Tersteeg is very beautiful to look at, but anyone who thinks about it doesn't envy his position. Be that as it may, artist is healthier – pecuniary difficulties are the greatest worry, I repeat, you, and you as a landscape painter, would surmount them sooner than I, though I, too, shall pull through some day. But, if you push off immediately, you'll overtake me, because the figure is complicated, takes longer. You'll understand that I speak in all seriousness.

## **The Hague, Sunday, 7 May 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 224)

I give you leave to say what you like to Mauve about the contents of this letter, but it doesn't have to go any further.

My dear Theo,

Today I met Mauve and had a very regrettable conversation with him which made it clear to me that Mauve and I have parted ways for ever. Mauve has gone so far that he can't retract it, or at least certainly wouldn't want to. I asked him to come and see my work and talk things over afterwards. Mauve refused outright, 'I certainly won't come to see you, it's over and done with'.

In the end he said, 'you have a vicious character'. At that point I turned around – it was in the dunes – and walked home alone.

Mauve blames me for saying, I'm an artist – which I won't take back, because those words naturally imply always seeking without ever fully finding. It's the exact opposite of saying, 'I know it already, I've already found it'. To the best of my knowledge, those words mean 'I seek, I pursue, my heart is in it'. I do have ears, Theo – if someone says 'you have a vicious character', what should I do? I turned around and went back alone, but with great sorrow in my heart because Mauve dared to say that to me. *I won't ask him to explain such a thing to me, nor will I apologize.*

And yet – and yet – and yet. I wish that Mauve regretted it. People suspect me of something... it's in the air... I must be hiding something... Vincent is keeping something back that may not be divulged.. Well, gentlemen, I'll tell you – you who set great store by manners and culture, and rightly so, provided it's the real thing – what is more cultured, more sensitive, more manly: to forsake a woman or to take on a forsaken one?

This winter I met a pregnant woman, abandoned by the man whose child she was carrying.

A pregnant woman who roamed the streets in winter – who had to earn her bread, you can imagine how.

I took that woman as a model and worked with her the whole winter. I couldn't give her a model's full daily wage, but all the same, I paid her rent and have until now been able, thank God, to preserve her and her child from hunger and cold by sharing my own bread with her. When I met this woman, she caught my eye because she looked ill.

I made her take baths and as much fortifying remedies as I could afford, she's become much healthier. I went with her to Leiden, where there's a maternity hospital she'll go to for her confinement. No wonder she was ill, the child was the wrong way round and she had to have an operation, which entailed turning the child with forceps. Still, there's a good chance that she'll come through it all right. *She'll have the baby in June.*

It seems to me that any man worth the leather his shoes are made of would have done the same in such circumstances. I find what I did so simple and natural that I thought I could keep it to myself. She found posing difficult, but she learned it anyway. I've progressed with my drawing by having a good model. This woman is now attached to me like a tame dove – for my part, I can marry only once, and when would be a better time to do it than with her, because only by doing so can I continue to help her, and otherwise hardship will make her take the same road that ends in the abyss.

She has no money, but she helps me to earn money in my work. I'm full of enthusiasm and ambition for my profession and work, if I left off painting and making watercolours for a while, it's because I was so shaken by Mauve's forsaking me, and if he really were to reconsider, I'd begin again with courage. As it is, I can't even look at a brush, it makes me nervous.

I wrote: Theo, can you enlighten me as to Mauve's attitude – perhaps this letter will enlighten you. You're my brother, it's natural that I speak to you about private matters, but someone who says to me, you have a vicious character, I stop speaking to him from that very moment.

I couldn't do otherwise, I did what the hand found to do, I worked. I thought I would be understood without words. I was in fact thinking of another woman for whom my heart beats – but she was far away and didn't want to see me, and this one – there she was, ill, pregnant, hungry – in the winter. I couldn't do otherwise. Mauve, Theo, Tersteeg, you all have my livelihood in your hands, will you leave me penniless or turn your backs on me – now I've spoken and shall wait to hear what's said to me.

Vincent

I'm sending you a couple of studies, because perhaps you'll see from them that she helps me greatly by posing.

My drawings are 'by my model and me'.

The one with the white cap is her mother.

Considering, however, that in a year, when I'll probably be working very differently, I'll have to base myself on the studies I'm making *now* as conscientiously as I possibly can, I'd like to have these three back in any case. You see that they've been made with care. If I later have an interior or a waiting room or some such thing, these will be of use to me because I'll have to consult them for the details.

But I thought it might be good for you to know how I spend my time. These studies demand a rather dry technique, if I'd concentrated here on the effect they'd be less useful to me later on.

But I think you'll understand this yourself. The paper I'd actually like to have most is the kind on which the female figure is drawn bending forwards, but if possible of the colour of unbleached linen. I have no more of it *in that thickness*, I believe one calls it *double* Ingres. I can't get any more of it here. When you see how that drawing is done, you'll understand that the thin kind can barely take it. I wanted to include a small figure in black



merino, but I can't roll it. The chair by the large figure isn't finished because I'd like to put an old oak chair there.

## **The Hague, on or about Thursday, 8 June 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 237)

Municipal hospital (4th class, Ward 6, no. 9)  
Brouwersgracht.

My dear Theo,

Should you come here towards the end of June, I hope you'll find me back at work, but at present I'm in hospital, although I'll only be here for about a fortnight. For some 3 weeks I'd been suffering a good deal from sleeplessness and chronic fever, and felt pain on passing water. And now it turns out that I've got a very mild case of what's known as 'a dose of the clap'. So I have to stay quietly in bed, swallow a lot of quinine tablets and from time to time have instillations of pure water or alum water, thus as harmless as could be. There's no reason for you to be in the least concerned about this, but as you know one has to take this sort of thing seriously and act immediately, because neglect can make it incurable or exacerbate matters. Take the case of Breitner, who's still here, though in another ward, and will probably leave soon — he doesn't know I'm here.

I'd be grateful if you didn't mention this, because people sometimes think it's terribly serious or make it sound serious by telling exaggerated tales. Of course I'm telling you exactly what it is, and you needn't keep silent if someone asks you directly, and in any event you needn't worry. Naturally I had to pay for a fortnight in advance, 10.50 guilders for nursing costs. There's no difference in food or treatment between those whose nursing is paid for by poor relief and those who pay the 10.50 guilders themselves. There are 10 beds in a ward, and I must say that the treatment is very good in every respect. I'm not bored, and the rest and proper, practical medical treatment are doing me good.

If it's convenient, be so good as to send around 20 June to the above address, but NOT by registered letter, 50 francs without registering the letter. As you know, I received 100 francs on 1 June, so I'm taken care of in any

event. If I have to stay longer, I'll pay the extra and stay on, and otherwise I'll have enough to carry on with.

I'd prefer to get back to work in a fortnight, of course, and I'll be dying to go back to the dunes in a fortnight.

Sien comes to see me on visiting days and is keeping an eye on the studio. Now I must tell you that the day before I came here I received a letter from C.M. in which he writes a good deal about the 'interest' that he takes in me and which, he says, Mr Tersteeg has shown, but, he continues, he didn't approve of how ungrateful I was for H.G.T.'s interest. So be it. I'm lying here completely calmly and quietly now, but I assure you, Theo, that I would be put in a very bad mood if someone again dished me up with the same sort of interest as H.G.T. on certain occasions. And when I think how His Hon. took that interest to the point of daring to compare me to an opium smoker, I'm still amazed that for my part I didn't show my interest by telling him to go to hell.

Talking of smoking opium, the comfort and luxury, the sort of glory in which H.G.T. moves and the fairly strong doses of flattery that his visitors bring for him — those are things that perhaps befuddle His Hon. now and again more than he realizes.

In short, with all his superficially refined politeness, with his superficially civilized manners, his smart clothes and so on and so on, on consideration and also looking back on it, I find something *malicious* in His Hon.'s character. I wish it weren't so, but I can't say otherwise. I don't doubt for a moment that His Hon. is a clever man, but another question comes first before I can respect him: is he a good man? Namely someone who doesn't deliberately and on principle cultivate hatred, rancour, bickering and sarcasm inside himself. That is the question.

I haven't replied to C.M.'s last letter, nor shall I. I appreciate His Hon.'s telling me that he'll also take something else later, no doubt out of interest too, but especially if he means it, which time will tell.

Another reason for not regretting lying here quietly for a few days is that, should I need it, I can get an official statement from the doctor here that I'm absolutely not the sort of person who should be sent to Geel or made a ward of court.

And if that isn't enough, I can also get another, if I make an effort, from the professor in charge of the lying-in clinic in Leiden.

But perhaps those people who might possibly get it into their heads to declare that *the family* or *society* would be so much better off if someone like me were to be declared mad or made a ward of court are so extraordinarily brilliant that in such cases they know far better than, for example, the doctor here.

Anyway, a letter from you would of course give me great pleasure at the moment.

Sien is getting ready to leave. I think of her a great deal — I expect her again later. May she come through it safely.

I resisted as long as I could and carried on working, but in the end I realized I needed to see a doctor urgently. But he told me just this morning that I would soon be rid of it. Did you get the two little drawings?

Adieu with a handshake, and wishing you as much good fortune as anyone could deal with.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I must tell you again that the precedent of *Geel*, at which time they were minded to make me a ward of court on *physical* grounds, makes it difficult for the family suddenly to change their story now and look for *financial* rather than *physical* reasons. Such arguments won't hold water. Again, I hope they won't go that far.

But write soon, for I'm longing for a letter.

You do understand, Theo, that I don't discuss family matters with the doctor here or the professor in Leiden — but because I'm being treated by the former and Sien by the latter, it will only take a word from me in the last resort to secure the testimony of these two gentlemen to set against any possible statements by a few people of which you spoke.

**The Hague, Monday, 31 July 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 252)

My dear Theo,

Just a word to say welcome before you come here. And to report the safe arrival of your letter and the enclosure, and to thank you very much.

It was most welcome for I'm working hard and again need one or two things.

As regards black in nature, we are of course in complete agreement, as I understand it. Absolute black doesn't in fact occur. Like white, however, it's present in almost every colour and forms the endless variety of *greys* — distinct in tone and strength. So that in nature one in fact sees nothing but these tones or strengths.

The 3 fundamental colours are red, yellow, blue,

„ composite „ orange, green, purple.

From these are obtained the endless variations of grey by adding black and some white — *red-grey*, *yellow-grey*, *blue-grey*, *green-grey*, *orange-grey*, *violet-grey*.

It's impossible to say how many different green-greys there are for example — the variation is infinite.

But the whole chemistry of colours is no more complicated than those simple few fundamentals. And a good understanding of them is worth more than 70 different shades of paint — given that more than 70 tones and strengths can be made with the 3 primary colours and white and black. The colourist is he who on seeing a colour in nature is able to analyze it coolly and say, for example, that green-grey is yellow with black and almost no blue, &c. In short, knowing how to make up the greys of nature on the palette.

To make notes out of doors, however, or make a small scratch, a highly developed feeling for the outline is absolutely essential, as it is for working it up later.

This doesn't come of its own accord, but firstly through observation, and then above all through persistent hard work and seeking. Some study of anatomy and perspective is also required.

Hanging beside me is a landscape study by *Roelofs*, a pen sketch, but I can't tell you how expressive that simple outline is. Everything is in there.

Another, even more telling example is the large Shepherdess woodcut by Millet which you showed me last year, and which has remained in my memory. Also, for example, the pen sketches by Ostade and Peasant Bruegel.

When I see such results, I feel the cardinal importance of the outline most clearly. And you know from Sorrow, for example, that I take great trouble to make myself better in that respect.

But you'll see when you come to the studio that besides seeking the outline I certainly also have a feeling, like anyone else, for the *strengths*.

And that I also have nothing against making watercolours — but they're founded on drawing first, and then from the drawing springs not only the watercolour but all kinds of other shoots that will develop in due course in me as in anyone else working with love.

I've attacked that old giant of a pollard willow, and I believe it has turned out the best of the watercolours. A sombre landscape — that dead tree beside a stagnant pond covered in duckweed, in the distance a Rijnspoor depot where railway lines cross, smoke-blackened buildings — also green meadows, a cinder road and a sky in which the clouds are racing, grey with an occasional gleaming white edge, and a depth of blue where the clouds tear apart for a moment.

In short, I wanted to make it like how I imagine the signalman with his smock and red flag must see and feel it when he thinks: how gloomy it is today.

I get a lot of pleasure out of work these days, though now and again I still clearly feel the after-effects of my illness.

As to the drawings I'm going to show you now, I think only this: that they will, I hope, serve as evidence that I'm not stuck on one level but am moving in a direction that is reasonable. As for the commercial value of my work, I have no pretensions other than that I would be very surprised if in time my work doesn't sell as well as that of others. Whether that happens *now* or *later*, well, I'm not bothered about that too much. Just working faithfully from nature and with persistence seems to me a sure way, and one that *can't* end up with nothing. The feeling for and love of nature always strike a chord sooner or later with people who take an interest in art. The duty of the painter is to study nature in depth and to use all his intelligence, to put his feelings into his work so that it becomes comprehensible to others. But working with an eye to saleability isn't exactly the right way in my view, but rather is cheating art lovers. The true artists didn't do that; the sympathy they received sooner or later came because of their sincerity. I know no more than that, and don't believe I need to know any more. Making an effort to find art lovers and arouse their love is something else, and of course



permissible. But it mustn't become a speculation that might well go wrong and would certainly waste time that ought to be spent on work.

Of course you'll find things in my present watercolours that should be taken out, but that must improve with time.

But you should know that I'm a long way from having a system or anything like that to keep up and lock myself into. That sort of thing exists in H.G.T.'s imagination, for example, rather than in reality. As for H.G.T., you understand that I have a personal reason for my opinion of him, and that I don't in the least intend to press *you*, for example, to take the same view of him as I am forced to do. As long as he thinks and says of me the kind of things you know of, I can't regard him either as a friend or as someone of use to me in any way, but quite the opposite. And I fear that his opinion of me is too firmly rooted ever to change, all the more so because, as you say yourself, he won't take the trouble to reconsider some things and to change.

When I see how several painters I know here struggle with their watercolours and paintings, unable to find the answer, I sometimes think, friend, your drawing is where the trouble lies. I don't for a moment regret not moving straight on to watercolour and painting. I know for sure that I'll catch up if I keep hacking away at it, so that my hand doesn't hesitate in drawing and perspective. But when I see young painters composing and drawing *off the top of their head* — then daubing on all sorts at random, *also off the top of their head* — then holding it at a distance and putting on a very profound, sombre expression to find out to what in God's name it might bear some resemblance, and finally, still off the top of their head, making what they can of it, it makes me feel feeble and faint, and I find it truly tedious and heavy going.

The whole thing makes me sick!

Yet these gentlemen regularly ask me — not without a certain patronizing air — 'whether I've started painting yet'.

Now I also sometimes find myself playing, so to speak, at random on a piece of paper, but I attach no more value to this than to a rag or cabbage leaf.

And I hope you'll understand that if I go on just drawing, I do that for two reasons. Because at all costs I want to acquire a sure hand when drawing above all else and, second, because painting materials and watercolours entail considerable expense for which there's no return in the early stage —

and these costs are multiplied twice and ten times if you work on the basis of a drawing that isn't yet sufficiently correct.

And if I got into debt or surrounded myself with canvases and papers daubed all over with paint without being sure of my drawing, my studio would quickly become a kind of hell, like a studio I once saw that seemed like that to me.

As it is, I always enjoy going there, and work there with pleasure.

So I don't believe that you suspect me of *unwillingness*.

It seems to me that the painters here have a way of reasoning as follows. They say, you must do this or that — if you don't do it, or not immediately or exactly, or if you object, the reply is: 'So you know better than I do, do you?' Thus immediately, sometimes within 5 minutes, there's a conflict between you. And the situation is such that neither side can move forwards or backwards. The least odious outcome of this is if one of the two parties has the presence of mind to keep silent and in one way or another quickly slip away through some opening. And would almost say, Sapristi, the painters are a family too. That's to say, an ill-fated association of people with conflicting interests, each one at odds with the rest, two or more of whom share the same feelings only when they join forces to obstruct another member. I hope, my dear brother, that this definition of the word 'family' doesn't always apply, especially not in the case of the painters or our own family. I hope with all my heart that peace will reign in our family, and I remain with a handshake,

Ever yours,  
Vincent

*[The top part of the next sheet is missing; the following text is crossed out]*

not to be afraid [xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx] to make it difficult for them if they'd rather not see me.

I refused, even when they asked me lately whether I wouldn't come sometime, so that they'd clearly see that I didn't want to make it difficult for them in any way. But I also expect that they, for their part, won't meddle in my affairs. While I care about the good will of those at home, Princenhage matters much less to me. Would you and can you be so good as not to talk about one thing and another, so much the better, if, though, it is talked about and that can't be avoided — too bad, but what do I care?

Well, as I said, I want nothing so much as to keep the peace, nothing is as necessary for my work as that very peace. So I'm grateful to you for everything you can do to reassure those at home and to keep them calm. I hope that you'll have pleasant days there and breathe in plenty of Brabant air. I still think of Het Heike so often, and have again been busy these last few days with a study from there, cottages with mossy roofs under the beech trees.

*[Passage missing on verso of sheet]*

must take. This is just about the *effect* of the pollard willow, but in the watercolour itself there's no black except in a mixed state.

[[sketch A](#)] Where the black is darkest in this little sketch is where the greatest strengths are in the watercolour — dark green, brown, dark grey. Well, adieu, and believe me that I sometimes laugh heartily at how people suspect me (who am really just a friend of nature, of study, of work — and of people chiefly) of various acts of malice and absurdities which I never dream of. Anyway — goodbye for now, with a handshake.



nemen moet. Dit is zuiver 1 effect van den knotweg  
 maar in de aqua vel zelf is geen zwart dan in gebroken toestand.



Waar op het schetsje het zwart 1 donkerst is zomen de grootste  
 krachten in de aqua vel. - donker groen bruin  
 grijs. Nu adieu, en geloof me dat sommigen  
 ik en hartelijk om loch dat de lui my <sup>hier</sup> eigenlijk  
 niet anders ken dan een vriend van de natuur van  
 studie, van werk - ook van menschen vooral / verduiden  
 van diverse kwaadaardigheden <sup>en absurpiteiten</sup> ~~waaraan~~ <sup>waaraan</sup>  
 geen hoer op mijn hoofd denkt. En - tot jees  
 met een hand ruk l. l.

Vincent

219 (221?)

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **The Hague, Sunday, 3 September 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 260)

Sunday morning

My dear Theo,

I've just received your very welcome letter and want to reply immediately, since today I'm having a bit of a rest anyway. I thank you for it, and for the enclosure and for one or two things you say in it.

And for your description of the scene with the workmen in Montmartre, which I found most interesting, because you give the colours as well so that I can see it — many thanks.

I'm glad you're reading the book about Gavarni. I thought it very interesting, and have become doubly attached to G. because of it.

Paris and its surroundings may be beautiful, but we can't complain here either. This week I painted something which I believe may give some idea of the impression of Scheveningen as we saw it when we walked there together. A large study of sand, sea, sky — a big sky of delicate grey and warm white through which an occasional spot of soft blue shines — the sand and the sea light — so that the whole becomes blond, though enlivened by the bold and distinctively coloured figures and pinks, which take on tone. The subject of the sketch I made of it is a pink weighing anchor. The horses stand ready to be hitched to the pink before pulling it into the sea. I enclose a scratch of it. I really laboured over it — I wish I'd painted it on panel or canvas. I tried to get more colour into it, namely depth, firmness of colour.

It certainly is curious how you and I often seem to have the same thoughts. Yesterday evening, for example, I came back with a study of the woods, and this week in particular, especially then, I was very absorbed in the question of depth of colour. And would have liked to discuss it with you, particularly in connection with the study I had made — and lo and behold, in your letter of this morning you happen to remark on how you were struck in Montmartre by the very pronounced colours, which nonetheless remained



harmonious. I don't know if it was exactly the same thing that struck us, but I'm absolutely sure you would also have felt what particularly struck me and probably seen it in the same way. I'll begin by sending you a scratch of the subject and telling you what the problem was.

The woods are already getting really autumnal — there are colour effects which I only rarely see depicted in Dutch paintings.

Yesterday evening I was occupied with an area of woodland with a slight upward slope covered in rotting and dead beech leaves. The ground was lighter and darker red-brown, all the more so because of the cast shadows of trees that threw bands across, weaker or stronger, half blotted out. The problem, and I found it to be most difficult, was to get the depth of colour — the enormous strength and fixity of that area — and yet it was only while painting that I noticed how much light there still was in that darkness. To keep it light and yet keep the glow, the depth of that rich colour, for there's no carpet imaginable as splendid as that deep brown-red in the glow of an autumnal evening sun, although tempered by the wood.

Out of the ground shoot young beech trees that catch the light on one side — are brilliantly green there — and the shaded side of those trunks a warm, strong black-green. Beyond these trunks, beyond the brown-red ground, is a sky, a very delicate blue-grey, warm — almost not blue — sparkling. And set against this is another hazy edge of greenness and a network of slender trunks and yellowish leaves. A few figures gathering wood move about like dark masses of mysterious shadows. The white cap of a woman who bends over to pick up a dry branch suddenly stands out against the deep red-brown of the ground. A skirt catches the light — a cast shadow falls — a dark silhouette of a fellow appears on top of the undergrowth against the brushwood fence. A white cap, bonnet, shoulder, bust of a woman set off against the sky. These figures — they're large and full of poetry — appear in the half-light of the deep shadow tone like huge terracottas being made in a studio. I'm describing nature to you — to what extent I conveyed it in my sketch I'm not sure myself — but I do know that I was struck by the harmony of green, red, black, yellow, blue, brown, grey. It was very Degroux-like, an effect similar, for example, to that sketch of the conscript's departure formerly in the Palais Ducal.

Painting it was hard graft. There are one and a half large tubes of white in the ground — yet that ground is very dark — in addition red, yellow, brown ochre, black, terra sienna, bistre, and the result is a red-brown that



varies from bistre to deep wine-red and to pale, blond reddish. Then there are also mosses and an edge of fresh grass that catches the light and sparkles brightly and is very difficult to get. There at last you have a sketch which — whatever may be said about it — I maintain has some meaning, says something.

While making it I said to myself: let me not leave before there's something of an autumn evening in it, something mysterious, something with seriousness in it.

However, because this effect doesn't last, I had to paint quickly. The figures were done with a few vigorous strokes with a firm brush — in one go. I was struck by how firmly the slender trunks stood in the ground — I began them using a brush, but because of the ground, which was already impasted, one brushstroke simply disappeared. Then I squeezed roots and trunks into it from the tube, and modelled them a little with the brush. Yes, now they stand in it — shoot up out of it — stand firmly rooted in it. In a sense I'm glad that I've never *learned* how to paint. Probably then I would have *LEARNED* to ignore effects like this. Now I say, no, that's exactly what I want — if it's not possible then it's not possible — I want to try it even though I don't know how it's supposed to be done. *I don't know myself* how I paint. I sit with a white board before the spot that strikes me — I look at what's before my eyes — I say to myself, this white board must become something — I come back, dissatisfied — I put it aside, and after I've rested a little, feeling a kind of fear, I take a look at it — then I'm still dissatisfied — because I have that marvellous nature too much in mind for me to be satisfied — but still, I see in my work an echo of what struck me, I see that nature has told me something, has spoken to me and that I've written it down in shorthand. In my shorthand there may be words that are indecipherable — errors or gaps — yet something remains of what the wood or the beach or the figure said — and it isn't a tame or conventional language which doesn't stem from nature itself but from a studied manner or a system.

Herewith also a scratch from the dunes. Standing there were small bushes whose leaves are white on one side and dark green on the other, and which constantly move and sparkle. Behind them dark wood.

As you see, I'm immersing myself in painting with all my strength — I'm immersing myself in colour — I've held back from that until now, and don't regret it. If I hadn't drawn I would never have felt or tackled a figure

that looks like an unfinished terracotta. But now, I feel I'm on the high seas — painting must proceed with all the strength that we can muster.

If I work on panel or canvas, the costs go up again — everything is so expensive — paint is expensive too, and is used up so quickly. Well, these are drawbacks that all painters face — we must see what's possible. I know for sure that I have a feeling for colour that will develop more and more, that painting is in my very marrow. I appreciate it enormously that you support me so loyally and strongly. I think of you so often — I would so much like my work to be substantial, serious, manly, and for it to give you pleasure as soon as possible.

I want to bring one thing to your attention as important. Wouldn't it be possible to get paint, panels, brushes, &c. for the *net* price? At present I have to pay the *retail* price. Are you in touch with Paillard or someone like that? If so, it seems to me it would work out considerably cheaper to buy paint, for example, in larger quantities, such as white, ochre, terra sienna, and we could come to an arrangement as to the money. It would of course be cheaper. Think about it, if you will. Good painting doesn't consist in using a great deal of paint, but to give a ground true strength, to make a sky bright, sometimes one mustn't worry about a tube more or less.

Sometimes the subject requires that one paints thinly, sometimes the material, the nature of the things, makes it self-evident that they must be impasted. At Mauve's — who paints very soberly in comparison with J. Maris, and even more so in comparison with Millet or Jules Dupré — in the corners of the studio there are nevertheless cigar boxes with the remains of tubes as numerous as the empty bottles in the corners of rooms at a soirée or meal such as Zola describes, for example. Now, if this month a little extra is possible, that would be wonderful. If not, then not. I'll work as far as I can. You enquire after my health, but how's yours? I believe that my remedy could also be yours. Being outdoors, painting. I'm well. I'm still troubled when I'm tired, but it's getting better rather than worse. I believe that it's also beneficial that I live as frugally as possible, but painting is my chief remedy. I hope with all my heart that you have some happiness and will find much more.

Accept a handshake in thought, and believe me

Ever yours,  
Vincent

As you see, in the scratch of the seascape there's a blond, soft effect, and in the woods a more sombre, serious mood. I'm glad that both of these exist in life. [[sketch A](#)]





## **The Hague, Sunday, 22 October 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 274)

Sunday afternoon

My dear Theo,

Your letter and the enclosure gave me very great pleasure, I don't need to tell you that. It's just what was needed and is a mighty help to me.

It's still autumnal weather here — rainy and chilly, but full of atmosphere — especially good for figures, which show a range of tones on the wet streets and roads in which the sky is reflected. It's what Mauve, above all, does so beautifully time and again.

As a result I've been able to do some more to the large water-colour of the crowd of people in front of the lottery office, and I've also just started another of the beach, of which this is the composition. [[sketch A](#)] I can agree entirely with what you say about times one occasionally has when one seems to be deadened to the things of nature, or when nature no longer seems to speak to us.



Londy midig

237

Naard. Theo,

Uw brief & het ingesloten ged. deden my zeer veel plezier, dat  
behoef ik u niet te zeggen, het komt erg van pas en is my  
een krachtige hulp.

We houden hier herfstweer - regenachtig & kiel, maar vol  
stemming - prachtig voor figuren vooral, die op de natte straten  
en wegen waar de lucht in weerkaatsel loonig uitkomen  
Het is 't geen Mauve vooral telkens zoo mooi doet.  
Ik heb nog wat daardoor kunnen doen aan de  
grote aquarel van de troep voek voor het lotery kantoor  
en zoo pas heb ik er ook weer een van het strand begonnen



waaraan dit

de compositie is.  
Ik kan volkomen  
overeenstemmen met  
wat gy zegt omtrent  
't dat de men soms  
heeft waart men  
stomps schijnt voor de  
dingen van de natuur  
of waart de natuur  
niet meer tot ons schijnt  
te spreken.

Ik heb dat ook schryfs en het helpt my wel eens als ik dan heel andere  
dingen aanpak. Maar ik stomp op landschap of licht effecten dan grijp ik  
de figuren aan en omgekeerd. Soms is er niets aan te doen van  
of te wachten tot het over gaat maar menigen keer lukt het my  
de ongeroefheid weg te krijgen door verweseling van meelwerk.  
waartop ik mijn attentie heb. Hoe langer hoe meer echter boeien my  
de figuren. Ik herinner my vroeger een l. d. gehad te hebben  
dat het gewoel voor 't landschap erg sterk by me was en ik veel  
meer getroffen werd door een schildery of tekening waan een lief effect  
of stemming van landschap goed was uitgedrukt dan door figuren  
Zelfs boeienden in 't algemeen de figuren schilders my meer een  
voort lamelyk gevoel eerbied in dan wel dat ik er warme sympathie  
voor had. Ik herinner my echter nog zeer wel in ~~een~~ den l. d.  
toch byzonder getroffen geweest te zijn door een tekening van Daumier  
& een oud man onder de kastanje boom in de Champ. Elysees (een  
illustratie voor Balzac) of schoon die tekening zoo important niet was  
maar ik weet wel dat het my toen zoo byzonder trof dat  
er als zoo flink en mannelijk in de opvalling van Daumier was dat  
ik dacht het moet toch goed zijn zoo te voelen en te denken en  
een man te dingen over 't hoofd te zien of voort te gaan om zich te  
concentreren op zoo iets wat te denken geeft en een mensch  
als mensch meer direct persoonlijk aangaat dan welken of wolken.



I, too, often have that, and sometimes it helps if I turn to something very different. If I'm dead to landscape or effects of light, I tackle figures, and vice versa. Sometimes there's nothing to be done except wait for it to pass, but on many occasions I manage to get rid of the unresponsiveness by changing the subjects I'm concentrating on. I'm becoming more and more fascinated by figures though. I remember having had a time in the past when the feeling for landscape was very strong within me, and I was much more struck by a painting or drawing in which a light effect or the mood of a landscape was well expressed than by figures. In general, the figure painters even inspired in me a kind of fairly cool respect rather than warm sympathy. However, I well remember being particularly struck at the time by a drawing by Daumier, an old man under the chestnut trees in the Champs Elysées (an illustration for Balzac), although the drawing wasn't that important. But I remember that it struck me so forcefully that there was something so firm and manly in Daumier's approach that I thought: it must be good to feel and think like that and overlook or ignore a mass of things so as to concentrate on something that's thought-provoking and appeals to a human being as a human being more directly than meadows or clouds.

And similarly the figures of either the English draughtsmen or the English writers, on account of their Monday morning-like sobriety and deliberate austerity and prose and analysis, continue to attract me as something solid and firm which gives one something to hold onto on days when one is feeling weak. And those of Balzac and Zola among the French writers just as much. As yet I don't know the books by *Murger* you write about, but I hope to become acquainted with them.

Did I write to you before that I read Daudet's *Les rois en exil*? I thought it rather beautiful.

The titles of those books sound very attractive, *La bohème* among others. How far we have strayed in our age from *la bohème* of Gavarni's day! It seems to me that things were a little warmer then, and more good-humoured and livelier than now. But I don't know, and there's also much that's good in the present, or would be more than is actually the case if there were rather more joining together.

At the moment a wonderful effect can be seen from the window of my studio. The city with its towers and roofs and smoking chimneys stands out as a dark, sombre silhouette against a horizon of light. The light, though, is

only a broad strip; above it hangs a heavy shower, more concentrated below, above torn by the autumn wind into great tufts and clumps that float off. But that strip of light makes the wet roofs glisten here and there in the sombre mass of the city (in a drawing you would lift it with a stroke of body-colour), and ensures that, although the mass all has the same tone, you can still distinguish between red tiles and slates.

Schenkweg runs through the foreground as a glistening line through the wet, the poplars have yellow leaves, the banks of the ditch and the meadow are deep green, figures are black.

I would draw it, or rather try to draw it, if I hadn't spent the whole afternoon toiling at figures of peat carriers which are still too much in my mind for there to be room for something new, and must remain there.

I do so often long for you and think of you so much. What you write about some characters in Paris, about artists who live with women, are less petty-minded than others perhaps, try desperately to stay young, seems well observed to me. Such people exist there and here. It's perhaps even more difficult there than here for a person to keep some freshness in domestic life, because that's almost more of an uphill struggle there. How many have become desperate in Paris — calmly, rationally, logically and rightly desperate? I read something along these lines about Tassaert, among others, whom I like very much, and was pained by what happened to him.

All the more, all the more, I think every attempt in this direction is worthy of respect. I also believe that it may happen that one succeeds and one mustn't begin by despairing; even if one loses here and there, and even if one sometimes feels a sort of decline, the point is nevertheless to revive and have courage, even though things don't turn out as one first thought. Moreover, don't think that I look with contempt on people such as you describe because their life isn't founded on serious and well-considered principles. My view on this is as follows: the result must be an *action*, not an abstract idea. I think principles are good and worth the effort only when they develop into deeds, and I think it's good to reflect and to try to be conscientious, because that makes a person's will to work more resolute and turns the various actions into a whole. I think that people such as you describe would get more steadiness if they went about what they do more rationally, but otherwise I much prefer them to people who make a great show of their principles without making the slightest effort to put them into practice or even giving that a thought. For the latter have no use for the

finest of principles, and the former are precisely the people who, IF they ever get round to living with willpower and reflection, will do something great. For the great doesn't happen through impulse alone, and is a succession of little things that are brought together.

What is drawing? How does one get there? It's working one's way through an invisible iron wall that seems to stand between what one *feels* and what one *can do*. How can one get through that wall? — since hammering on it doesn't help at all. In my view, one must undermine the wall and grind through it slowly and patiently. And behold, how can one remain dedicated to such a task without allowing oneself to be lured from it or distracted, unless one reflects and organizes one's life according to principles? And it's the same with other things as it is with artistic matters. And the great isn't something accidental; it must be *willed*. Whether originally deeds lead to principles in a person or principles lead to deeds is something that seems to me as unanswerable and as little worth answering as the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg.

But I believe it's a positive thing and of great importance that one should try to develop one's powers of thought and will.

I'm very curious about what you'll think of the figures I'm doing at present, when you see them sooner or later. It's the same with them as with the question of the chicken and the egg: should one make figures for a composition one has done first, or combine the figures made separately so that the composition flows from them? I believe it comes down to the same thing. *Just as long as one works*. I end with that with which you close your letter — that we have in common a liking for seeing behind the scenes or, in other words, are inclined to analyze things. Now this, I believe, is exactly the quality one must have in order to paint — one must exercise this power when painting or drawing. It may be that there has to be something innate in us, to some extent (but that too you have, and so do I — for that we may have to thank our childhood in Brabant and a background that helped, much more than is usually the case, to teach us to think), but above all, above all, it's only later that the artistic sense develops and ripens through working. *How* you might become a very good painter I don't know, but I certainly believe that it is in you and will come out.

Adieu, old chap, thanks for what you sent, and a hearty handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I have the stove in place already — old chap, how I wish we could look at drawings and sketches for an evening sometime — and *woodcuts*. I have some more splendid ones.

This week I hope to have orphan boys to pose, then I may be able to rescue the drawing of orphan children after all.

## **The Hague, Sunday, 26 and Monday, 27 November 1882**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 288)

Sunday

My dear Theo,

Yesterday I at last got around to reading a book by Murger, namely *Les buveurs d'eau*. I find something of the same charm in it as in, say, the drawings of Nanteuil, Baron, Roqueplan, Tony Johannot, something witty, something lively. Yet it's highly conventional, or at least so this book seems to me (I haven't yet read any others by him), and in my view there's the same difference between him and Alph. Karr and Souvestre, for example, as between an Henry Monnier and Compté-Calix and the above artists. I'm trying to take all the people I compare from the same era.

It breathes that age of *la bohème* (though the reality of that period is papered over in the book) and that's why it interests me, but in my view it lacks originality and honesty of sentiment. It may be, though, that his books in which there are no painter characters are better than this one — it appears that writers are always unfortunate with painter characters, Balzac among them (his painters are fairly *uninteresting*). Even Zola might be right in his *Claude Lantier* — *Claude Lantiers* certainly exist — but still one would like to see Zola doing a kind of painter different from *Lantier* for once, who it seems to me is drawn from life by Zola after someone or other, and certainly not the worst, from the movement that was known as Impressionists, I believe. And *they* aren't the ones who make up the core of the body of artists.

Conversely, I know of few good drawn or painted portraits of writers. On this point most painters also lapse into the conventional and make of a

writer a man who simply sits at a table full of papers, or don't even go that far and make him a gentleman with a collar and tie, and moreover a face without any particular expression.

There's a painter by *Meissonier* that I find beautiful; it's that figure seen from behind, bending forwards, with the feet on the cross-bar of the easel, I believe. All one sees is a pair of knees drawn up, a back, a neck and the back of a head, and just a glimpse of a fist with a pencil or something like that. But the fellow does it well, and the action of concentrated attention is caught, just like in a certain figure by Rembrandt where a little fellow sits reading, also huddled up, with his head resting on his fist, and one immediately feels that sense of being absolutely gripped by the book.

Take the Victor Hugo by Bonnat — beautiful, really beautiful — but even more beautiful in my view is the Victor Hugo described in words by Victor Hugo himself, nothing else than just this:

*And I, I was silent —  
As one sees a blackcock keep silent on the heath.*

Don't you think that little figure on the heath is splendid? Isn't it as vivid as a little general of 93 by Meissonier — about 1 centimetre or so in size?

There's a portrait of Millet by Millet that I find beautiful, no more than a head with a kind of shepherd's cap on top.

But the looking — with half-closed eyes — the intense looking of a painter — how beautifully that's caught, and that cockerel-like quality, if I may put it like that.

It's Sunday again. This morning I was on Rijswijkseweg. The meadows are partly flooded so that there was an effect of tonal green and silver with the rough, black and grey and green trunks and branches of old trees twisted by the wind in the foreground, a silhouette of the village with its spire against the light sky in the background, here and there a fence, or a dung-heap with a flock of crows picking at it.

How you would feel something like that — how well you would paint it if you wanted to.

It was extraordinarily beautiful this morning, and it did me good to go for a long walk, for with all the drawing and the lithographs I'd hardly been out of doors this week.

As to the lithography, I hope to get a proof tomorrow of an old man. I hope it turns out well. I did it with a kind of crayon that's specially intended for this process, but I fear that the ordinary lithographic crayon will turn out



to be the best after all, and I'll be sorry I didn't use that. Well, we'll see how it turns out.

Tomorrow I hope to learn various things about printing that the printer's going to show me. I would love to learn how to print myself. I think it quite possible that this new method will revive lithography. I believe that a way could be found of uniting the advantages of the new with the old method. One can never predict anything for certain, but who knows whether it might not lead to new magazines being founded again.

### *Monday*

That was as far as I got yesterday evening — this morning I had to go to the printer's with my old man. Now I've followed everything: the transfer to the stone, the preparation of the stone, the actual printing. And I have a better understanding of what I can change by retouching. Herewith the first impression, not counting one that went wrong.

I hope to do it better in time. I myself am very far from satisfied with this but, well, getting better must come through *doing* it and through trying. It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print — but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror — that it seems to me that one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the existence of 'something on high' in which Millet believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can't be meant for the worms.

Israëls has done it so very beautifully. Perhaps the most wonderful passage in Uncle Tom's cabin is the one where the poor slave, sitting by his fire for the last time and knowing that he must die, remembers the words

Let cares like a wild deluge come,  
And storms of sorrow fall,  
May I but safely reach my home,  
My god, my Heaven, my All.

This is far from all theology — simply the fact that the poorest woodcutter, heath farmer or miner can have moments of emotion and mood that give him a sense of an eternal home that he is close to.

Just as I get back from the printer's I receive your letter. I think your Montmartre is splendid, and I would certainly have shared the emotion that it evoked in you. I believe, by the way, that Jules Dupré or Daubigny also often tried to arouse those thoughts in their work. Sometimes there's something indescribable in those effects — it's as if the whole of nature is speaking — and when one goes home one has the same feeling as when one has just finished a book by Victor Hugo, for example. For my part I can't understand that not everyone sees and feels it — after all, nature or God does it for everyone who has eyes and ears and a heart to perceive. I think that a painter is happy because he's in harmony with nature as soon as he can depict, to some extent, what he sees.

And that's a great deal. One knows what one has to do; there's an abundance of subjects and Carlyle rightly says, Blessed is he who has found his work. If that work — as in the case of Millet, Dupré, Israëls &c. — is something intended to bring peace, to say *sursum corde* or 'lift up your hearts', then it's doubly encouraging. One is also less alone then, because one thinks: I may be here on my own, but while I'm here holding my tongue my work may be speaking to my friend, and whoever sees it won't suspect me of being cold-hearted. Understand, however, that the dissatisfaction about poor work, the failure of things, the technical difficulties can make one terribly melancholy.

I assure you that when I, for my part, think of Millet, of Israëls, Breton, Degroux — so many others, Herkomer among them — I can be terribly despondent. One only knows what those fellows are when one is at work. Now, to stomach that despondency and melancholy as one is, to be patient with oneself, not to take a rest but to toil despite a thousand shortcomings and faults and the precariousness of the victory — that's why a painter is also not happy: the battle with himself, improving himself, renewing his energy. All this complicated by the material difficulties.

That painting by Daumier must have been beautiful. It's puzzling that something that speaks as clearly as that, for example, isn't understood, or at least that the position is that, as you say, it isn't certain a buyer will be found, even at a low price.

For many a painter this is something intolerable, or almost intolerable, at least. One wants to be an honest man, and one is, one works just as hard as a porter, and yet one falls short, one has to give the work up, one sees no chance of carrying it out without spending more on it than one will get back

for it. One has a feeling of guilt, of falling short, of not keeping promises, one isn't honest as one would be if the work was paid for at its natural, fair price. One is afraid to make friends, one is afraid to stir, one would like to call out to people from a distance like one of the old lepers: Don't come too close, for contact with me will bring you sorrow and harm. With this whole avalanche of cares in one's heart, one must set to work with a calm, everyday face, without moving a muscle, carry on with daily life, try things out with the models, with the man who comes to collect the rent, in short, with all and sundry. One must cool-headedly keep one hand on the tiller to continue the work, and with the other hand try to ensure that one does no harm to others. And then come storms, things one hadn't foreseen; one doesn't know what to do, and one has a feeling that one may hit a rock at any moment.

One can't present oneself as somebody who can be of benefit to others or who has an idea for a business that's bound to be profitable — no, on the contrary, it's to be expected that it will end with a deficit and yet, yet, one feels a power seething inside one, one has a task to do and it must be done.

One would like to speak like the men of 93, we must do this and that, first those, then those, then the last will die, it's a duty so it goes without saying, and nothing more need be added.

Yet this is the time to combine and to speak.

Or is it rather that, given that many have fallen asleep and don't wish to be woken up, one must try to confine oneself to things that one can finish alone, which one faces alone and has sole responsibility for? So that those who sleep can go on sleeping and rest. Now you see that this time I too am expressing more intimate thoughts than normally; you're to blame for this, because you did the same.

Concerning you, this is what I think: you are after all one of those on watch, not one of the sleepers. Would you not rather keep watch while painting than while selling paintings? I say this coolly, not even adding: this or that would be preferable in my view, and trusting to your own insight into things. That one runs a high risk of going under oneself, that being a painter is like being a *forward sentry*, this and other things — that goes without saying. You mustn't think I'm so very afraid; painting the Borinage would be something, for instance. That would be so difficult, so dangerous even, as is needed for a life in which rest and pleasure are quite a long way off. All the same, I would undertake something like that if I could undertake it, that

is if I couldn't foresee for certain, as I do now, that the costs would exceed my means. If I found others interested in this or a similar enterprise, I would risk it. Precisely because at the moment it's really only you who cares what I do, for the time being it's in the dark and must remain there. So I'll find things to do in the meantime. But I'm not leaving it in order to spare myself or anything like that. I hope it'll be possible for you to send something again not later than 1 Dec. Well, old chap, I thank you right heartily for your letter, and a warm handshake in thought, believe me

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **The Hague, on or about Thursday, 7 June 1883**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 351)

My dear Theo,

Today I received a letter from home and I wanted to talk to you about it, although Pa doesn't mention you in the letter, because in the circumstances you might perhaps like to know something about their state of mind, above and beyond what they may write to you directly. And my impression is that for the present you may be entirely at ease on that score.

The letter in question is Pa's first since his visit and is very amiable and cordial and was accompanied by a package containing a coat, a hat, a packet of cigars, a cake, a money order.

In the letter was the outline of a sermon, by far the best part of which I thought was the biblical text, and which made less of an impression on me than a few words about the funeral of a farm labourer later on.

And otherwise that Ma was at Princenhage and domestic details.

Well, the reason I'm telling you this at such length is so that you'll see from it that there's no particular tension or anything abnormal; rather, I got the impression that Pa's mood was more passive or resigned, tending towards good-natured melancholy, more so than one would expect if one were to go only by the expressions of objections you wrote to me about.

So I think those words were intended more as advice or warning (advice that in the end has no solid grounds in my view, and doesn't hold

water) and less as a sign of definite resistance or opposition to your firm decision.

They may think that you haven't yet made up your mind, or they may believe that you haven't given it enough thought.

Because in my last letter I disapproved so strongly of what Pa had said — and still disapprove of it now, being decidedly of the opposite opinion inasmuch as I don't consider it appropriate in this case to raise objections to do with money and religion — I wanted to soften my words, in the sense that I believe that it's a question here of a fault (at any rate a fault in my view) that lies more in Pa's words than in his heart and mood.

And I have in mind to talk to you about how Pa is an old man and so deeply fond of you, and you'll find, I believe, that he'll accept your view if there's no alternative, even if it conflicts with his own, yet couldn't possibly accept estrangement from you or having less contact, etc.

And adopting a humane point of view, I take back my opinion: 'by saying that, they have shown they are unworthy of your trust and in my eyes you needn't confide in them any further', or something similar that I wrote then, I don't remember exactly. But don't misunderstand me, not because I disapprove less of what they said, but because I believe that in this case one shouldn't take it too seriously, and there's no pressing need to take up arms against it as long as it remains only words.

Cutting it short by saying something like, for example, 'You take a rather gloomy view of the future' and 'can hardly demand from me that I act as if the end of the world were imminent' is wiser in this case, I believe, than taking their words very seriously.

It seems to me that Pa's a little melancholy, though, and is perhaps fretting a little about you and imagining gloomy things — but again Pa writes not a syllable about it directly, and said not a word about it at the time of his visit. But *not* talking about it is in fact also rather abnormal. Anyway — I, too, know Pa quite well, and believe I can see signs of some melancholy.

If you want to help him, write quite lightly and cheerfully, and write about your visit this summer as though it's certain you'll see them again soon (even though you may not know yourself yet how you'll fit your visit in as regards the time).

For perhaps, perhaps Pa himself is conscious of having gone a little too far, or worried about how you'll take it, or afraid that you won't come.



Of course I don't know how matters stand and am only guessing, but I do think this, Pa is an old man and deserves to have people cheer him up if they can.

You know well enough that in my view you ought to be loyal to the woman; there's no question of my saying anything less about that than I did, but do what's right and don't blame Pa if he's mistaken. That's what I wanted to say. Don't even refer to the fact that he's mistaken unless he keeps going on, perhaps he'll retract of his own accord.

Now a word about the work.

Today I asked for permission to draw sketches in the old men's and old women's home, namely the men's ward, the women's ward and the garden. I was there today. From the window I sketched an old gardener by a crooked apple tree, and the workshop of the home's carpenter, where I drank tea with two orphan men.

I can go into the men's ward as a visitor. It was very real, inexpressibly real.

A small chap with a long, thin neck in a chair on rollers, among others, was priceless.

In the carpenter's workshop, with a view of the cool, green garden with those two old boys, it was just like the scene in, for example, that photo by Bingham after that small painting by Meissonier, the two priests sitting drinking. Perhaps you know the one I mean. Whether I'll get permission isn't, however, entirely certain, and has to be applied for from the assistant deacon, which I've done and have to go back for the answer.

Apart from that, I'm working out how to draw the dung-heap. I wrote to you that I had hopes of getting a Scheveningen cape, well, I've got it, and an old hat thrown in which isn't particularly beautiful, but the cape is superb and I immediately started working with it. Am just as pleased with it as I was with the sou'wester before.

And I've got as far with the sketch of the dung-heap as more or less getting into it that sheep-shed effect of inside against outside — the light under the dark sheds — and the group of women emptying their dustbins is beginning to develop and take shape.

Now the wheelbarrows going up and down and the rag-pickers with dung forks, that grubbing about under the sheds, has still to be expressed without losing the effect of light and shade of the whole. On the contrary, it must be strengthened as a result.

I believe you'll have your own, similar view of Pa's words, and so I'm not telling you anything new, but because I spoke so sharply about it I wanted you to know at the same time that I don't do such a thing with pleasure but with regret, and would be glad if peace could be kept with a little geniality.

This winter Pa was pretty much against my being with the woman just as much as now, yet he sent a warm coat 'in case I could make use of it', not specifying what for but obviously with the idea 'she may be cold'. Well, you see, that is right after all, and for one such deed I would gladly put up with a deluge of words.

Because I myself am not one of those who don't fail in words either — such people would be perfect — and don't make the slightest claim to perfection.

And wanted to point out to you that in any case Pa objects to my being with the woman, MUCH MORE SO indeed than with you, and despite that last winter he still no doubt thought something like: 'that wretched woman — but she shouldn't suffer from the cold'. Now, probably the same in your case: 'that poor papist woman shouldn't be alone even so', or something like that. So don't be concerned, be of good heart, and put their minds at ease.

Adieu, old chap, with a handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **The Hague, Monday, 2 July 1883**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 358)

My dear Theo,

Your letter and the enclosure were not a little welcome, and the message that you'll write again at greater length no less welcome. I hope you'll write to me in detail about the hundred masterpieces; it must be good to have seen something like that. And when one remembers — at the time there were some people who were rather suspect as regards their character, intentions and genius, according to public opinion, people of whom the most absurd things were said, Millet, Corot, Daubigny, etc., who were regarded more or

less the way the village constable regards a stray shaggy dog or a tramp without a passport, and time passes and lo and behold ‘the hundred masterpieces’, and if a hundred isn’t enough, then *innumerable*. Let alone what becomes of the village constables. Little remains of *them* except some notes of the testimony as a curiosity. Yet it remains a drama, I believe, the history of the great men — given too that they not only had to deal with village constables during their lifetimes, since usually they’re no longer with us when their work is publicly recognized, and during their lifetimes they were under some pressure for a long time because of the opposition and the difficulty of struggling through life. And so whenever I hear of the public recognition of the merits of some people, I think all the more of the quiet, slightly sombre figures of those who had few personal friends, and in their simplicity I find them *even* greater and more poignant like that.

There’s an etching by *Legros — Carlyle in his study* — which often comes to mind when I want to imagine Millet or anyone else as he was.

What V. Hugo says about Aeschylus: ‘They killed the man and then they say: “let us put up a bronze statue of Aeschylus”’; something of that is always in my mind when I hear of an exhibition of someone’s work. So I don’t look much at ‘the bronze statue’. Not because I disapprove of something being publicly honoured, but because of the association, they killed the man. Aeschylus was simply banished, but here too banishment was a death sentence, as it often is.

Theo, when you come to the studio I’ll be able to show you some things that you’ll most certainly not be able to see all together anywhere else.

I could show you some things that one might call the hundred masterpieces of modern wood engraving. Work by people whose names, even, are totally unknown to most art lovers.

Who knows of Buckman, who knows of the two Greens, who knows of Régamey’s drawings? Only a few. Seeing them all together, one is astonished by that steadiness of the drawing, that personal character, that seriousness of approach, and that fathoming and presentation of the most everyday figures and subjects found on the street, on the market, in a hospital or orphanage.

I already had some last year, but what I’ve found since goes far beyond my expectations.

It’s agreed, isn’t it, that your visit to the studio when you come won’t be too brief?

I've worked on the potato grubbers since writing to you. And begun a second one of the same subject with a single figure of an old man.

I'm also working on a sower on a large field with clods of earth, which I believe is better than the other sowers I tried before. I have at least 6 studies of the figure himself, but now I've placed him in the space more specifically as the drawing proper, and carefully studied the land and sky as well.

And then I have studies for the burning of weeds and stalks, and of a chap with a sack of potatoes on his back. And one with a wheelbarrow.

If I now reflect with all possible good will (in order to see things differently, supposing I was wrong) on Tersteeg's opinion that I should do watercolours, then I can't understand how these figures of the chap with a sack, of the sower, of the old potato grubber, of the wheelbarrows, of the weed burner could keep their personal character if I attacked them with watercolour. The result would be something very mediocre, of the sort of mediocre which I don't care to go into in depth. Now at least they have character, something that's in harmony — though distantly — with what Lhermitte, for instance, is seeking. Watercolour isn't the most sympathetic means for anyone who particularly wants to express the boldness, the robustness and the force of the figures.

If one is looking more exclusively for tone or colour, then it's rather different, then watercolour lends itself excellently to that. Now I *do* admit that one could do different studies of those same figures in reality from a different point of view (namely tone and colour), done with a different intention — yet I ask, if my frame of mind and personal feeling makes me notice first of all the character, the structure, the action of the figures, will I be blamed if, following this emotion, I arrive not at a watercolour but at a drawing in black and brown only?

Yet there are watercolours in which the outlines are very forcefully expressed, such as those by Régamey, those by Pinwell and Walker and Herkomer, which I certainly think about sometimes (those of the Belgian *Meunier*), but even if I sought that, Tersteeg would still not be content with it. Keep on saying, it isn't saleable and the saleable must be your no. 1.

For my part I see in that in plainer terms 'you're a mediocrity and you're pretentious in not submitting yourself and not making small mediocre things; you make yourself ridiculous with your so-called seeking, and don't work.' This is implied in what Tersteeg said to me the year before last and

last year, and I'm still faced with it. To me Tersteeg will I think remain '*the everlasting NO*'.

Not only I but almost all who seek their own way have something like this behind or beside them as a perpetual discourager. Sometimes one is burdened by it and feels wretched and, so to speak, overwhelmed.

But, as said, it's the everlasting no. Against that, one finds an everlasting yes in the example of men of character, and sees *collier's faith* in them.

It is so, however, that life sometimes becomes sombre and the future dark when working costs money and one feels oneself going ever deeper into the ground the harder one works, instead of work helping one to stay above water and one being able to overcome the difficulties and costs by making a greater effort.

I'm making progress with my figures, but financially I'm losing ground and can't keep up.

And of late I've sometimes thought of moving to the country, either on the seashore or somewhere where work on the land is real. Because I believe it would save some money. I could do what I want here as well if I could earn some more — go here and there now and again to get studies. And the advantage here is that my studio is good, and one isn't completely outside the art world, after all. In any event, one can hardly do entirely without some measure of contact, seeing and hearing something now and again.

I sometimes think of going to England — in London a new magazine of importance has been established, The Pictorial News, of the same standing as L. News and The Graphic, perhaps there may be work and a salary there. But what can one say about it for sure? I hope you'll come soon, a year is a long time not to have seen each other while thinking of each other all the time.

I haven't asked you for details about the woman recently because I'm confident that you two love each other, and that's the main thing, and if one knows that there's no need to ask about details.

Our little man is now just one year old, since 1 July, and is the most cheerful, most agreeable child you can imagine, and I believe it's an important point gained as regards the recovery and complete cure of the woman herself that this child is doing well and keeps her busy and draws her thoughts towards him. I sometimes think that otherwise it might be good for her to spend some time in the country and not see the city and be away from

her family; this could help to bring about a radical improvement. For she is improved now, but still, the influence of her family obstructs a great deal at times, I wanting to have simplicity and she being urged to intrigue and be two-faced. Well, she's what one might call a child of her time, and her character has been influenced by her circumstances, so that the remnants will always persist in the form of a certain dejection and indifference and lack of a firm belief in one thing and another. I've already thought of country life for her many, many times. But moving also means spending a large amount in one go. And I'd also like to be married before I moved, if it came to going to the country or to London.

Here I miss the necessary friction with others, and I don't see how that will get any better. In the end, one place or another will do for me, and I prefer to move as little as possible.

Write to me above all as soon as you can decide anything about when you're coming. Lately I've been in two minds about various things, and consequently under strain, and that will continue until we've seen each other again and talked about the future.

I recently read articles about Holland by Boughton. They were written to accompany illustrations by him and by Abbey in which there are splendid things.

I made a note of something from it — a description of the island of Marken — it makes me want to go there. When one had once got round to settling somewhere where it was very beautiful, who knows how happy one would feel about it? But in that sort of situation one needs at least one point of contact with the art world, because of course the fishing folk know nothing about it, and one has to live.

Above all write the promised letter about the one hundred masterpieces &c., and should you do well in business and if a little extra is possible, it wouldn't be untimely. As for living in the country — I find nature beautiful, and yet there are many things tying me to the city, the magazines especially, the opportunities for reproduction. I wouldn't mind not seeing locomotives, but never seeing a printing press again would be harder to take. Adieu, old chap, with a handshake and thanks again for what you sent.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.



I read 'Mes haines' by Zola — there are strong things in it, although in my view he is greatly mistaken, not even mentioning Millet in his general reflections. I do think this is true: note that what pleases *the* PUBLIC is always what's most banal, what we're accustomed to seeing every year; we're used to insipidities of that kind, to such pretty lies, that we reject powerful truths with all our might.

## **The Hague, Sunday, 22 July 1883**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 363)

My dear Theo,

I thank you for your letter, and for the enclosure, although I can't suppress a feeling of sadness over what you say, 'as for the future, I can give you little hope'. If you mean that only in relation to financial matters, I wouldn't be downcast, but if I'm to take it as applying to my work, I really don't see how I deserve that. It just so happens that I can now send you the prints of photos after a few of my recent drawings, which I promised you earlier but couldn't manage because I was flat broke.

I don't know how you intended those words, nor can I know. Your letter is too brief, but it gave me an unexpected blow right in the chest.

But I would like to know what the position is, whether you noticed something in me, that I wasn't making progress or something.

As for financial matters, you'll remember writing to me months ago about bad times. My answer was: very well, a reason for us to do our very best on both sides; see that you send me the absolutely essential, I'll get on with making more progress so that perhaps we can place something with the illustrated magazines. I've since made a start on various large compositions in which there was more of a subject than in studies of single figures.

So now my first consignment of photos to be shown to someone or other if needed coincides with your 'as for the future, I can give you little hope'. Is there something in particular???

I'm rather nervous about this. You must write again soon. Well, as you see, the photos are SOWER — POTATO GRUBBERS — PEAT DIGGERS. I've now done some more, SAND QUARRY, WEED BURNERS, DUNG-HEAP, POTATO GRUBBER

1 figure, COAL LOADERS, and at Scheveningen this week I worked on MENDING NETS (Scheveningen fishermen's wives).

And two larger compositions of Dune workers (one of which I showed to Tersteeg again) which, although they'll require a lot more labour, are still what I'd most like to complete.

Long rows of diggers — poor fellows set to work by the city — in front of a piece of dune land that's to be dug over. But to do that is terribly difficult.

*Peat diggers* gives you a first idea of it. I wouldn't be so melancholy about it, brother, if you hadn't added something that worries me. You say 'let's hope for better times'.

You see, that's one of the things one must be careful about, in my view. *Hoping for better times mustn't be a feeling but a doing something in the present.*

My doing depends on your doing, in the sense that if you were to reduce what you send I couldn't go on and would be desperate.

Precisely because I felt the hope of better times alive within me, I continued to throw myself into it with all my strength — into the work of THE 'PRESENT' — without thinking about that future other than to trust that work would bring its reward, although the spending on food, drink, clothes had to be reduced again and again, week after week, more and more. I was faced by the question of going to Scheveningen, the question of painting. I thought: come, press ahead. But now I wish I hadn't begun, old chap, for it means extra expenses and I don't have it. The weeks passed, many, many weeks and months of late, when each time the expenses were slightly more than I could keep up with, even with all the fretting and worrying and economizing. So when the money arrives from you, not only do I have to manage on it for 10 days but I immediately have to pay out so much that in those 10 days that lie ahead one couldn't be in a more meagre situation from the outset. And the woman must breastfeed the child, and the child is strong and growing, and she's often worried because there's no milk.

I, too, have an enormous feeling of faintness at times in the dunes or elsewhere, because there's nothing coming in.

Everyone's shoes patched and worn out and other petty vexations that give one wrinkles. Anyway — it would be nothing, Theo, if only could hold on to the thought: it will work all the same, just press on. But now to me your words 'as for the future, I can give you little hope' are like '*the hair*

*that breaks the camel's back at last'*. The burden is sometimes so heavy that one hair more makes the animal fall to the ground.

Well, what to do? I've seen and spoken to Blommers twice already in Scheveningen, and he saw a few things of mine and asked me to call on him sometime.

I did some painted studies there, a bit of sea, a potato field, a field with women mending nets, and here at home a chap in the potato field planting cabbage in the empty spaces between the potato leaves, and then I'm working on the large drawing of beeting the nets, as they call it. But I feel my enjoyment fading, one needs a fixed point somewhere. You see, the fact that you say to me, just have hope for the future, is as if you yourself no longer have any hope for me. Is that so? I can't help it, I feel unwell because of the worry, and I just wish you were here.

You say that the effect of the autographs is rather meagre. That doesn't surprise me in the least when I consider that someone's physical state influences his work, and my life is too dry and too meagre. Honestly, Theo, for the sake of the work we ought to have eaten a little better, but we couldn't afford it and things will stay like that if I don't get a little more leeway by one means or another. So do show the photos to Buhot or someone if you can't arrange it yourself, and try to find a market through him, if you can.

I almost regret starting to paint again, for if I can't make any progress I would rather I had given it up. It can't be done without paint, and paint is dear, and because I still owe Leurs and Stam some money I can't run up a bill. And I like painting so much. Now that I was doing it again I took more pleasure in things from last year, and have hung painted things in the studio again. The sea, which I love very dearly, needs to be attacked with painting, otherwise one has no grip on it.

Look, Theo, I just hope that you aren't losing heart, but truly, if you're going to talk about 'giving no hope for the future' then I feel sad, for you must have the courage and the energy to send, otherwise I'll be stuck and powerless to move forward, for those who could be friends have become hostile, and appear to want to stay like that.

Consider the fact that, after all, I've done nothing that could justify this, at any rate not explain why Mauve, say, or Tersteeg or C.M. are so cool as not to want to see anything or say a word. I find it human that a coolness may arise over one thing or another, but to maintain the coolness now that

more than a year has passed, and after repeated attempts at reconciliation, is not kind.

Thus I end for today with the question, Theo, when in the beginning you spoke to me about painting, and if we could have foreseen then the work now, would we have hesitated to think it was right that I should become a painter (or draughtsman then, what difference does it make?)? I don't believe that we'd have hesitated to press ahead if we could have foreseen these photos, for instance, would we?, for a painter's hand and eye are needed after all if one wants to create such a scene in the dunes in one form or another. But now I often feel so wretched when I see people remaining so apathetic and cold that I lose heart. Well, then I recover again and go back to work and smile about it, and because I work in the present and don't let a day go by without working, I believe that I do indeed have hope for the future, although it doesn't feel like that because, as I say, there's no room left in my brain for philosophizing about the future, either to upset me or to console me. Holding on to the present and not letting it pass by without managing to get something out of it — now that's what I believe duty is.

So you should also try to hold on to the present with respect to me, and let's persevere with what we can persevere with, preferably today rather than tomorrow.

But you needn't spare me, Theo, if it's just a question of money, and if you, as friend and brother, retain some sympathy for the work, saleable or unsaleable. As long as that's the case, that I still retain your sympathy in this respect, then it matters precious little to me, and we must confer calmly and coolly. Then, if there's no hope for the future financially, I would propose a move to the country, saving half the rent in a village *deep in the country*, and for the same amount of money that one pays here for bad food getting good, healthy food, which is needed for the woman and the little ones, and for me too in fact. Also having advantages perhaps for models.

As you know, last summer I painted — now I've hung up several studies again, because when I was doing new ones I saw that there was something in them after all. Painting helped me indirectly with my drawing during the winter months and the spring, and I worked that up right until these recent drawings. Now, though, I feel it would be good to paint again for a while, and I need that to become richer in tone, in the drawings too. I had planned to paint the women sitting in the grass mending the nets in a fairly large format, but after what you said I'll wait until I've spoken to you.

I've received small prints of the autographs, but weak ones, yet the man tells me he ought really to have put on more ink and that he'll give me better ones. No matter, I've experimented with doing a croquis in a small format as if for an illustrated magazine. Oh, Theo, I could make much more progress if I was a little better off.

But I can't think of a way out, I come up against expenses on all sides. When I read the life story of one painter or another, I see that in fact they all needed money, and were miserable when they couldn't carry on.

Write soon, for I'm not well and in two minds as to whether I dare go ahead with Scheveningen, which will involve the costs of painting materials.

I had hoped that you would have been able to send something — well, in any event, especially if you have no money, you must write to me soon, for it's quite a feat to keep one's spirits up in the circumstances.

I think the drawings from which the photos have been taken aren't yet deep enough in tone, not yet depicting the emotion nature evokes sufficiently, but if you compare this with what I began with, the earlier figures, I believe I'm not mistaken in seeing signs of progress and we mustn't let go of that advance, so let us toil on.

I wish you could come. Write soon in any case. Adieu, with a handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I don't think it right, Theo, to spend more than one receives — but if it's a question of stopping or carrying on working, I'm for carrying on to the end. Millet and other predecessors carried on right up to the bailiff, and some went to prison or had to move hither and thither, yet I don't see in them that they stopped. And with me it's still only the beginning, but I see it in the distance like a dark shadow, and it sometimes makes working sombre.

I've spoken to Breitner again, about those three compositions in progress. It was indeed so that he had done them in a moment when he was out of sorts. He told me that he regretted doing them like that, and showed me an altered composition of the drunkard and studies of low street women that were infinitely better. And I also saw some watercolours in the making and a painting of a farrier's that were done with a calmer and more correct hand

and head. I read a book he lent me, *Soeur Philomène* by De Goncourt, who wrote Gavarni. The story is set in a hospital, very good.

## **The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 7 August 1883**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 371)

My dear Theo,

Pending your arrival there's hardly a moment that I'm not with you in my thoughts.

These days I'm doing my best to paint some different studies so that you can see something of them at the same time.

And I feel fine when I seek distraction through this change of work, for while I don't literally do as Weissenbruch does and spend a fortnight with the polder workers, I nonetheless act in the same spirit, and looking at nature has a calming effect.

And, moreover, I have definite hopes of making considerable progress with colour in this way. It seems to me that the latest painted studies are more assured and sounder in colour.

Thus, for example, a few I did recently in the rain of a man on a wet, muddy road better express the mood, I believe. Anyway, we'll see when you come. Most are landscape impressions. I wouldn't claim that they're as good as the ones sometimes found in your letters, since I often run into technical difficulties, but still I believe they have something similar.

For example, a silhouette of the city in the evening as the sun is setting, and a towpath with mills.

Otherwise things are so wretched that I still feel faint if I'm not actually at work, but I believe that is passing. I'm definitely going to do my best to build up a reserve of strength, because I'll need it if I want to do a lot of painting, including figures. A certain feeling for colour has been aroused in me of late when painting, stronger than and different from what I've felt before.

It may be that this recent malaise is connected to a kind of revolution in the working method which I've sought for more than once already, and have thought about a great deal. I've often tried to work less drily, but each time it came out roughly the same. But these days, now that some weakening



prevents me from working as normal, it's just as if this helps rather than hinders, and letting myself go a little and looking more through my eyelashes instead of looking sharply at the joints and analyzing how things fit together leads me more directly to see things as patches of colour next to each other.

I'm curious as to how this will continue and where it will lead. It has sometimes surprised me that I'm not more of a colourist, because my temperament would certainly lead one to expect that, and yet up to now that has hardly developed at all.

I repeat, I'm curious as to how it will continue — I see clearly that my recent painted studies are different. If I remember rightly, you have another one from last year, of a few tree-trunks in the woods. I don't think it's particularly bad, but it's still not what one sees in studies by colourists. There are even correct colours in it, but although they're correct they don't do what they should do, and while the paint is highly impasted here and there, the effect remains too meagre. I take this one as an example, and believe that the recent ones that are less impasted are nonetheless becoming more assured in colour, because the colours are more worked into each other and the brushstrokes are painted over each other, so that it fuses together more, and one captures something of the softness of the clouds or of the grass, for instance.

At times I've been very concerned that I wasn't making progress with colour, and now I have hope again. We'll see what happens. Now you can imagine how eager I am for you to come, for if you also see that it's changing I'll no longer doubt that we're on course. I don't dare trust my own eyes when it comes to my work.

For example, the two studies that I did while it was raining, a muddy road with a small figure. It seems to me that it's the opposite of some other studies — when I look at it I recognize the mood of that sad, rainy day, and in the figure, though no more than a few patches, there's a kind of life that isn't due to accuracy of drawing, for it isn't drawn, so to speak. What I want to say is that I therefore believe that in those studies, for instance, there's something of that mysteriousness that one gets by looking at nature as if through the eyelashes, so that the forms simplify themselves into patches of colour.

Time will tell, but for the present I see something different in the colour and the tone in several studies.

Lately I've thought sometimes of a story that I read in an English magazine, a tale of a painter in which a person featured who had also been weakened during a difficult time, and went to a remote area in the peat fields and found himself in the melancholy nature there, so to speak, and was able to paint nature as he felt and saw it. It was very accurately described in the story, evidently by someone who knew about art, and it struck me when I read it, and I've now been thinking of it from time to time these past few days.

Anyway, I hope we'll soon be able to talk about it and confer together. If you can, write again soon and, of course, the earlier you can send, the more I would welcome it.

With a handshake in thought.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

For no particular reason I can't help adding something here that's just a recurring thought of mine.

Not only did I start drawing relatively late, but on top of that I can't count on living for a great many years, relatively speaking. When I think about that cool-headedly and calculatedly — as if estimating or measuring something — then it's in the nature of things that I can't possibly know anything definite about it.

Yet through comparisons with various people with whose life one is familiar, or in comparison with whom one believes one sees certain correspondences, one can nonetheless put forward certain propositions that aren't absolutely without foundation.

So as to the length of time in which to work that lies ahead of me, I believe I may assume the following without being too hasty: that my body will endure for a certain number of years *come what may* — a certain number, say between 6 and 10. I dare all the more to assume this because at present there's no immediate *come what may*.

That's the period that I count on FOR SURE, for the rest I would find it far too airily speculative to dare to determine anything in myself, given that whether or not anything is left after that period will depend precisely on these first 10 years, say. If one goes into a serious decline in those years, one won't get past 40; if one remains sufficiently well preserved to withstand certain shocks to which a person is likely to be subject, solving more or less

complicated physical problems, then from 40-50 one is once more in new, relatively plain sailing.

Calculations about that are *not* on the agenda *now*, but plans for a period, as I began by saying, of between 5 and 10 years are.

My plan is *not* to spare myself, not to avoid a lot of emotions or difficulties. It's a matter of relative indifference to me whether I live a long or a short time. Moreover, I'm not competent to manage myself in physical matters the way a doctor can in this respect. So I carry on as *one unknowing* but who knows this one thing — '*I must finish a particular work within a few years*' — I needn't *rush* myself, for that does no good — but I must CARRY ON *working* in calm and serenity, as regularly and concentratedly as possible, as succinctly as possible. I'm concerned with the world only in that I have a certain *obligation* and *duty*, as it were — because I've walked the earth for 30 years — to leave a certain souvenir in the form of drawings or paintings in gratitude. Not done to please some movement or other, but in which an honest human feeling is expressed. Thus this work is the goal — and concentrating on that thought, what one does and *does not* do simplifies itself in that it's not a chaos, but everything one does is one and the same aspiration. Now the work is going slowly — all the more reason not to lose any time.

*Guillaume Régamey* was, I believe, someone who doesn't have much of a reputation (as you know, there are two Régameys, F. Régamey paints Japanese and is his brother), but was a character for whom I have great respect all the same. He died at the age of 38, and a period of 6 or 7 years was devoted almost exclusively to drawings that are in a very singular style and were done while working was made difficult by physical problems. He is one of many — a very good person among many good people. I mention him not to liken myself to him — I'm not as good as he was — but to give an example of a certain self-control and willpower that held on to an inspiring idea that showed him the way to produce a good work in serenity despite difficult circumstances.

I see myself in a similar way — as having to do something with heart and love in it within a few years, and do it with willpower. If I live longer, so much the better, but I'm not thinking about that. In those few years SOMETHING MUST BE DONE — that thought is my guiding principle in making plans for the work. A certain desire to make every effort will thus seem to you all the more understandable. At the same time a certain resolve

to use simple means. And perhaps you'll also be able to understand that, for my part, I don't view my studies in isolation, but always have in mind the work as a whole.

## **The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 5 September 1883**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 381)

My dear Theo,

I received your letter just now when I came home from the dunes behind Loosduinen, soaking wet because I had spent 3 hours in the rain at a spot where everything was *Ruisdael*, *Daubigny* or *Jules Dupré*. I came back with a study of crooked, windswept trees, and a second of a farm after the rain. Everything is already bronze, everything is what one can see in nature only at this time of year, or if one stands before one of those paintings like a Dupré, for instance, and so beautiful that one's imagination always falls short of it.

You write about your walk to Ville-d'Avray that Sunday, at the same time on that same day I was also walking alone, and I want to tell you something about that walk, since then our thoughts probably crossed again in some degree.

I spoke to the woman as I wrote to you — we felt that staying together in the future was ruled out, indeed that we'd make each other unhappy, but we felt on both sides how strongly we were attached to each other. And then I went out of doors, a long way away, to talk to nature for a while.

Well, I came to Voorburg, and went from there to Leidschendam.

You know the landscape there, superb trees full of majesty and serenity beside green, dreadful, toy-box summer-houses, and every absurdity the lumbering imagination of Hollanders with private incomes can come up with in the way of flower-beds, arbours, verandas. Most of the houses very ugly, but some old and elegant. Well, at that moment, high above the meadows as endless as the desert, came one driven mass of cloud after the other, and the wind first struck the row of country houses with their trees on the opposite side of the waterway, where the black cinder road runs. Those trees, they

were superb, there was a drama in each *figure* I'm tempted to say, but I mean in each tree.

Then, the whole was almost finer than those windblown trees seen on their own, because the moment was such that even those absurd summer houses took on a singular character, rain-soaked and dishevelled. In it I saw an image of how even a person of absurd forms and conventions, or another full of eccentricity and caprice, can become a dramatic figure of special character if he's gripped by true sorrow, moved by a calamity. It made me think for a moment of society today, how as it founders it now often appears like a large, sombre silhouette viewed against the light of reform. Yes, for me the drama of a storm in nature, the drama of sorrow in life, is the best. A 'paradou' is beautiful, but Gethsemane is more beautiful still.

Oh, there must be a little bit of air, a little bit of happiness, but chiefly to let the form be felt, to make the lines of the silhouette speak. But let the whole be sombre.

I must say that the woman is bearing up well. She feels sorrow and I do too, but she isn't despondent and is making an effort.

I bought a piece of cloth recently to make some study linen for myself, and now I've given it to her for vests for those scrawny children. And I'm having clothes of mine altered for them so that they'll get one or two things, and she's busy with that.

When I say we are separating as *friends*, that is true — but we are definitely separated, and I've since been more at peace with that than I expected, because what was wrong with her was of such a nature that it would have been fatal both for me and for her if we'd been bound to each other, given that one is responsible, so to speak, for each other's failings. But I'm still left with the worry — how will she be in a year's time? I'll certainly *not* take her into my house again, but I didn't want to lose touch with her, because I love her and the children too much.

That is also possible, precisely because it was and still is something different from a passion.

I hope the Drenthe plan goes ahead.

You ask what I might need.

I don't need to tell you that I intend to do a lot of work, I must do that to revitalize myself. And over there they have *nothing* in the way of painting equipment, so as regards taking a supply, taking things that are really useful, definitely the more the better.

Good tools are never a waste, and they pay for themselves even if they are expensive. And to get ahead one must do a great deal of painting. I hope to lose very little of the time that I'll spend there, and to have a lot of models too, which will probably be cheap enough there. But life is cheap there, and I'll be able to do more with the 150 francs than here.

But in fact I can arrange all that as it suits me. I would think it desirable to be able to make one big purchase, because I lack many things that others have and that are actually indispensable.

My plan is to get a long way with painting in Drenthe so that I'll be eligible for the Drawing Society when I come back. That, in turn, is linked to a second plan, to go to England.

I believe that it's permissible to speculate provided one doesn't do it in the air or on foundations that are all too shaky. As far as England is concerned, I certainly expect to sell something more easily there than here — that's true — so I think of England from time to time. But I don't know how the point that I've reached stands in relation to the English art lovers, and because I don't know that I would first like to have a small, positive beginning of sales here before I think it advisable to take steps over there. *If* I begin to sell a few things here, *then* I shan't hesitate for a moment but start sending things over there or go there. Yet as long as I sell absolutely nothing here, I would very likely be mistaken as to the timing if I didn't have the wisdom to wait until I see just a beginning here.

I hope you find this idea reasonable, that would reassure me. For in England people are very serious once they begin; whoever finds favour in England finds *loyal* friends there. I need only mention E. Frère and Henriette Browne, for example, who are now just as well liked as on the first day their work was seen there. But if one wants to succeed over there, one must take a little care and be certain that one can be productive in what one sends over there.

Your letter pleased me greatly, for I see that you think that there's something in the Drenthe plan, and that's enough for me; later on it will become clear of itself what benefit there is to be gained. But for me it's already linked directly to becoming a member of the Drawing Society and also to England — because I know for sure that the subjects from over there will be sympathetically received in England if I'm able to put some sentiment into them.



In short, press on with Drenthe, whether we can spend a great deal or a little for the time being.

I'll go there when I have the money to travel, even though I have few painting materials left, because the time of autumnal effects has already begun, and I hope to capture some of them. Yet I hope I'll be able to give the woman a little more for the early days. But if I *can* leave *I shall*.

I say to *you* that for the time being I plan to help the woman a little, I *may* not and indeed *cannot* make it very much. I'm telling *no one* else but you about this. And what I say to you — that whatever happens to her I cannot and shall not have her in my house again — you can rely on that, for it's not in her to do what she should do. I also sent a few words to Pa to say that I was separated from her, but that my letter to Pa about staying with her and getting married remained a fact all the same, and that Pa had talked around that and given no answer to the real question, a second fact. I don't know how it will appear in years to come, or whether that wouldn't have been better than separating; now we're too close to everything to see things in their true context and the consequences. I *hope* that it will all turn out for the best, but her future and my own look sombre to me. I do believe that something will still awaken in her, but that's precisely the point — it *ought to have been* awakened already, and now it will be difficult for her to follow her better thoughts when she has no one to support her in that. Now she wouldn't listen, then she will yearn to speak to me and it won't be possible. As long as she was with me, she had no contrasting example, and now in other surroundings she'll remember things that she didn't care about and paid no attention to at the time. Now, because of the contrast, she'll think about that sometimes. For me it's sometimes thoroughly distressing that we both feel the impossibility of struggling through the future together, and yet that we're so attached. She has been more confiding than normal of late, and the mother had incited her to play some tricks which she didn't want to inflict on me. Things of the kind we talked about when you were here, such as starting a row and the like.

You see, there's something in her like the beginning of something more solid, and may that remain so. I wish she could marry, and when I tell you that I'll keep an eye on her it's because I advised her to do *that*. If only she can find a man who is half good, that's enough, then the beginnings of what has come into her here will develop further, that is, a more domestic, simple disposition, and if she sticks to that I won't have to leave her entirely to her

fate in the future either, for then at least I'll remain her friend, and sincerely so.

Write to me again soon, and regards.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I'm adding a few words here. You ask what I need. I thought about that and it's impossible for me to say what I really regard as *necessary*, for that would be no small amount, so let's see what's within our reach and make do with that. What's within our reach will probably remain *below* what's fundamentally needed, but in life it's already something if one can carry out one's plans in part. And I for one say to you that I'll make do with what you can spare.

Life is cheaper over there, and I'll be able to make savings automatically compared to here. And when a year has passed I'll have made substantial progress through those savings alone. I can have paint &c. sent by *parcel post* when I'm over there. So I'll take a supply *if I can*, that goes without saying, but if *I can't* I shan't postpone the journey because of that.

I have hopes that the past year will turn out to have been solid, for I haven't neglected my work and, on the contrary, I've strengthened a number of weak points. There are more that need strengthening, of course, but it's their turn now.

As for what I wrote to you in a previous letter, that the woman had immediately broken certain promises, that was bad enough, namely an attempt to be a maid in a whorehouse, an opportunity the mother had fished out and urged on her. The woman herself immediately regretted it and has rejected it, but all the same it's very, very weak of her, and especially to do it *at that particular time*, but that's what she's like — up to now at least — so far she hasn't had the strength to refuse such a thing with an absolute *no*. Anyway, she forces me to take measures that I've often previously postponed and postponed.

On this occasion, though, I saw something in her as if it had been a crisis — I hope a 'thus far and no further'. And so it is that she herself views this separation as possibly turning out for the best in the end.

And because there's an all too fatal rapport between her and her mother, those two must go together down the wrong or the right road.

And it will come down to living with the mother and going out to work together by turns, and trying to get by in an honest way. That's their plan, and they already have some workdays, and I've placed advertisements, and they look every day and are beginning to enjoy it.

I'll keep on doing that and carry on with advertisements as long as necessary, and in short all the things whereby I can be of use or assistance.

And if I can I'll pay several weeks' rent for them when I go, as well as a loaf a day or some such to give them yet more time to set their plan up properly and add to it. But the fact that I intend to give them that is something I haven't yet *promised them*, because I don't know myself if I'll be able to do it. I'll act according to circumstances.

And I firmly recommend to her a marriage of convenience with a widower or someone, to which I add that she'll have to be *better* for such a person *than she was for me*.

And that she herself knows well enough in what ways she fell short with me, that now she must be wise and *learn from that that I don't blame her in the least, because I know that an improvement or reform doesn't succeed all at once but has steps, so to speak*, and so, provided she stays at the point where she is now and works her way up, starting from there, without allowing herself any relapse, she needn't take her mistakes with me to heart or become despondent, just try to make amends by being better for someone else.

And she herself well understands these things for the present, and I hope to keep them alive. Becoming despondent and then letting oneself go is, however, a weakness they share, yet at the same time they're also patient when it comes to starting afresh, the woman in particular is showing that more, and I, although her faults are many and troublesome enough, yet I know that fundamentally there's something good that extenuates *everything*, and for that reason, too, I don't despair of her future. That MISERICORDE MUST *lie in nature itself* for such a person is something I wish I could fully believe, and I find it wicked of myself that I'm not fully persuaded of it, in so far as I'm not yet able to resign myself to everything, however, and can't, for the time being at least, give up *everything* that I've struggled so hard to put right.

Write to me again soon, won't you?

## The Hague, Monday, 10 September 1883

To Theo van Gogh (letter 384)

My dear Theo,

I've just received your letter and the 100 francs enclosed. And I leave tomorrow for Hoozeveene in Drenthe. Then on from there, and from there I'll give you an address.

So don't write any more to *here* in any event. And I would suggest you write a word to C.M. right away to inform him of my departure because, as you say yourself, there's the possibility that he might write to me at this address. If he has already done so, it would be best if he asked at the post office for the letter to be returned for, not knowing exactly what my next address will be, I can only inform the post here or the landlord later on.

Friend Rappard is also travelling, and already has Drenthe behind him and is nearly on Terschelling. He wrote to me from Drenthe 'the country here is very earnest in mood, the figures often made me think of studies by you. As for life here, one could certainly not live more cheaply anywhere else. And I think that the south-east corner (the area I have in mind) is the most original.'

Theo, I certainly have a feeling of melancholy on leaving, much more so than would have been the case had I been convinced that the woman would be energetic and that her good will wasn't in doubt. Anyway, you know the gist from one thing and another. For my part I must press on or I myself will sink without getting her any further by that. Until she becomes more active of her own accord, namely more steadily instead of in short bursts, she'll remain on the same inadequate spot, and even if she had 3 helpers in my place they wouldn't be able to do anything about it unless she herself cooperated. But the children to whom one's heart goes out? I couldn't do everything for them, but if only the woman had been willing!

I shan't go on moaning, though, for I must press on nonetheless.

Well, to be on the safe side I didn't dare to take paint along, for over there I'll soon have to pay for my things when they arrive, then lodgings and more travel expenses. But if we're lucky enough to get something from C.M., I'll have one or two things I've picked out sent there by parcel post. The sooner that can be done the better. So if you hear anything, write to me as soon as you know my address over there, and of course I agree with the

proposed arrangement (regarding the partial reimbursement of the 100 francs); indeed, if you're hard up, wait for a favourable moment before sending everything that might come from him.

I, for one, think that C.M. might just do nothing at all.

In any event, brother, it was firm and well advised of you to send this immediately. For now I'll be over there and able to get my bearings, and we can certainly economize ourselves even if no help comes. So thanks for this, and I believe it'll prove to be a good step. My plan is to stay there until you come to Holland next year, for instance. I wouldn't want to miss you then. But in that way I would just see all the seasons go by and have a general view of the character of things in that region.

I've equipped myself with an internal passport, valid for 12 months. With which I have the right to go where I will and to stay in one place for as long or as short as I please.

So I'm very glad that I can make progress, for in this way we help ourselves; over there I reckon 50 francs for board and lodging and the rest on the work, and that's a big difference from what I was able to do here in the circumstances. So even if others won't help, we won't be idle.

Regards, for I still have a lot to arrange today — write a short letter to C.M. — and in the next few days you'll receive a message with my address, by tomorrow evening if all goes well. Adieu, with a handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

You wrote to me recently 'perhaps your *duty* will induce you to behave differently or something'. That's something I immediately thought about a great deal, and because my work so undoubtedly demands the step of going there, it's my understanding that work is more directly duty than even the woman, and that the former mustn't suffer for the sake of the latter. Which was different last year, since in my view I'm *now exactly* at the point of Drenthe. But one has divided feelings and would like to do both, which *cannot be* in the circumstances, both because of the money and, more than that, because she can't be counted on.

# Peasant Painter

## Drenthe and Nuenen, September 1883–October 1885

In September 1883 Vincent set off for rural Drenthe, taking with him a minimum of artists' materials. The choice of this northern province must have been prompted by what his fellow artists Mauve, Van Rappard and Breitner had told him about its unspoiled nature. He stayed for a while in Hogeveen before travelling in early October via passenger barge to Nieuw-Amsterdam/Veenoord, where he found lodgings in a boarding house. From this base he explored the surrounding area for suitable subjects, which resulted in a series of evocative landscapes with dilapidated huts, women working in the peat bogs, a man burning weeds at dusk and workers by a peat barge. He described an excursion to Zweeloo in lyrical terms ([402](#)), and wrote to Theo that the beauty of the countryside 'absorbs and fulfils me so utterly' (405). Vincent had an ulterior motive in praising the landscape so highly to Theo: his brother's relations with his superiors at Goupil had become difficult and Vincent tried to persuade him to leave the art trade and city life behind, and become a painter. Theo, understandably, did not take his brother's suggestion seriously.

However impressed he was by the landscape, loneliness bore down heavily on Vincent during these cold and rainy months. It was difficult to work outdoors, there were no models to be had, and he was running out of painting materials. The evenings were long, and this is reflected in the length of his letters. Theo's mention of his uncertain financial situation prompted Vincent to leave Drenthe. He set off for Hogeveen on foot – a walk that took him more than six hours – where he caught a train to his parents' home in Nuenen, near Eindhoven.

On 5 December 1883 Van Gogh first set foot in the austere but respectably furnished parsonage where his parents had been living for over a year. He was to remain in the village for two years. His homecoming and welcome were, to his mind, anything but cordial: 'There's a similar reluctance about taking me into the house as there would be about having a large, shaggy dog in the house' ([413](#)). The mangle room behind the house



was converted into a studio for him, but he found its location and arrangement far from ideal, and there was not enough room for models to sit for him.

Inspired by Jean-François Millet, Van Gogh's new mission was to paint peasants and labourers at work. His first subjects were weavers: between December 1883 and July 1884 he made a series of drawings and paintings of weavers at their looms. In the months when it was difficult to work out of doors, he painted whole series of still lifes. From May 1884 he rented from the Catholic sacristan a reasonably large studio: two rooms en suite, which gave him enough room to work comfortably. He was still in frequent contact with Van Rappard: they painted together and discussed technique, and Van Rappard came to respect his friend's talent for drawing. The fact that Van Gogh frequently gave lessons to amateur painters in the area testifies to his growing self-confidence.

In his first years as an artist, Van Gogh had primarily occupied himself with drawing, and his chief considerations were of a technical nature: questions of composition, the handling of line, and the effects produced by the materials. Colour played a secondary role. This changed in Nuenen, when he decided to devote himself completely to painting and immersed himself in colour theory. His letters from this period include quotations and paraphrases about art, artists and theories on colour taken from books by Bracquemond, Silvestre, De Goncourt, Sensier, Gigoux, Blanc and Bürger, which he read intently.

In early 1884 had Vincent decided that, in exchange for the money Theo sent, his brother should do as he saw fit with his artworks, ideally finding buyers for them. Evidently Van Gogh struggled with his dependence on Theo. The tone of Vincent's letters is more defensive in the Dutch period, or he tries to vindicate the choices he has made. As yet he had no saleable work to justify Theo's support, and it is a fact that Theo saw little chance of selling any of it before Vincent left the Netherlands at the end of 1885. Their relations were often strained in this period; Theo found that Vincent was making their parents' lives difficult, and Vincent was often disappointed in his brother for his supposed lack of understanding and moral support.

In the summer of 1884, Van Gogh again caused consternation by beginning a relationship with a neighbour, Margot Begemann, who was mentally unstable. Both of their families did everything they could to put an end to the affair, the low point of which was Margot's attempted suicide by

swallowing strychnine. Van Gogh was alone with her when the poison took effect, and got her to a doctor. While she was convalescing in Utrecht, he remained loyal to her and even contemplated marriage, but eventually abandoned the idea. It was at times such as these that he felt how deep the differences were between himself and those around him.

On 26 March 1885 Van Gogh's father died of a heart attack. Shortly afterwards, Vincent's sister Anna asked Vincent to leave the parsonage, believing that his moods were putting further strain on their grieving mother, and he went to live in his studio.

Van Gogh had a growing conviction in his abilities as an artist, although he still considered many of his works as experiments, referring to them as 'studies'. He painted dozens of peasants' heads in preparation for an important figure composition, resulting in May 1885 in *The Potato Eaters*, which in his eyes was the first fully fledged painting he had ever made. The frankly negative reactions to this great test of his workmanship made Van Gogh realize that in many respects he was in a rut. His work was apparently unsellable, his objectionable behaviour made models unwilling to pose for him, and he missed the necessary contact with the art world. Theo tried to make Vincent understand that his approach was not in step with the 'modern art' in Paris. Feeling the need for new stimuli and further study, Van Gogh set out in November 1885 to study at the art academy in Antwerp. He also hoped that the city would offer him a larger choice of subject matter and opportunities to sell his work.



The parsonage in Nuenen. The studio was located at the lower right.

## Hoogeveen, on or about Friday, 14 September 1883

To Theo van Gogh (letter 386)

My dear Theo,

Now that I've been here for a few days and have walked around a good deal in different directions, I can tell you more about the region I've fetched up in.

I enclose a scratch after my first painted study from this part of the world, a hut on the heath. A hut made of nothing but sods of turf and sticks. I've also seen inside about 6 of this type, and more studies of them will follow.

I can't more accurately describe the way the exterior looks in the twilight or just after sunset than by reminding you of a particular painting by Jules Dupré which I think belongs to Mesdag, with two huts in it on which the mossy roofs stand out surprisingly deep in tone against a hazy, dusty evening sky.

*That is here.*

Well, it's very beautiful inside these huts, dark as a cave. Drawings by certain English artists who have worked on the moors in Ireland most realistically convey what I observe. A. Neuhuys does the same with somewhat more poetry than strikes one at first, but he makes nothing that isn't also fundamentally true.

I saw superb figures out in the country — striking in their expression of soberness. A woman's breast, for example, has that heaving motion that is the exact opposite of voluptuousness, and sometimes, if the creature is old or sickly, arouses compassion or else respect. And the melancholy which things in general have is of a healthy kind, as in Millet's drawings.

Happily, the men here wear breeches; it shows off the shape of the leg, makes the movements more expressive.

To mention one of the many things that gave me something new to see and to feel during my explorations, I'll tell you how here one sees, for example, barges pulled by men, women, children, white or black horses,

loaded with peat, *in the middle of the heath*, just like the ones in Holland, on the Trekweg at Rijswijk, for instance.

The heathland is rich. I saw sheepfolds and shepherds that were more attractive than those in Brabant.

The ovens are more or less like the ones in T. Rousseau's Communal oven; stand in the gardens under old apple trees or among the celery and cabbages.

Beehives, too, in many places.

One can see that many of the people have something wrong with them — it isn't exactly healthy here, I think — perhaps because of unclean drinking water. I've seen some girls of, I would say, 17 or younger who still had something very beautiful and youthful, in their features too, but generally it *fades* very early. Yet this doesn't detract from the fine, noble bearing of the figure that some of them have, who prove to be very withered when seen close to.

There are 4 or 5 canals in the village, to Meppel, to Dedemsvaart, to Coevorden, to Hollandscheveld.

If you follow them, you see here and there a curious old mill, farmhouse, shipyard or lock. And always the peat barges coming and going.

To give you an example of the authentic character of this region: while I was sitting painting that hut, two sheep and a goat came up and started grazing *on the roof* of the house. The goat climbed onto the ridge and looked down the chimney.

The woman, who heard something on the roof, shot outside and threw her broom at the said goat, which leapt down like a chamois.

The two hamlets on the heath where I've been and where this incident took place are called *Stuifzand* and *Zwartschaap*. I've also been in various other places, and now you can imagine how unchanged it still is here, since Hoogeveen is a town after all, and yet nearby there are shepherds, those ovens, those turf huts &c.

I sometimes think with great melancholy about the woman and the children, if only they were looked after — oh, it's the woman's own fault, one could say, and it would be true, but I fear that her misfortune will be greater than her guilt. I knew from the outset that her character is a ruined character, but I had hopes of her finding her feet and now, precisely when I don't see her any more and think about the things I saw in her, I increasingly come to realize that she was already too far gone to find her feet.

And that just makes my feelings of pity even greater, and it's a melancholy feeling because it isn't in my power to do anything about it. Theo, when I see some poor woman on the heath with a child in her arms or at her breast my eyes become moist. I see her in them; her weakness and slovenliness, too, only serve to intensify the likeness. *I know that she isn't good*, that I have every right to do what I'm doing, that to stay with her there WASN'T POSSIBLE, that bringing her with me really *wasn't possible* either, that what I did was even sensible, wise, what you will, but that doesn't alter the fact that it goes right through me when I see some poor little creature, feverish and miserable, and that then my heart melts. How much sadness there is in life. Well, one may not become melancholy, one must look elsewhere, and to work is the right thing, only there are moments when one only finds peace in the realization: misfortune won't spare me either. Adieu, write soon, and believe me

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **Hoogeveen, Friday, 12 October 1883**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 394)

Dear brother,

I just received your letter. I read and re-read it with interest, and something that I've already thought about sometimes, without knowing what to do about it, is becoming clear to me. It's that you and I have in common a time of quietly drawing impossible windmills &c., where the drawings are in a singular rapport with the storm of thoughts and aspirations — in vain, because no one who can shed light is concerned about them (only a painter would then be able to help one along the right path, and their thoughts are elsewhere). This is a great inner struggle, and it ends in discouragement or in throwing those thoughts overboard as impractical, and precisely when one is 20 or so, one is passionate to do that. Whatever the truth of the matter that I said something then that unwittingly contributed to throwing those things overboard; at that moment my thoughts were perhaps the same as yours, that's to say that I saw it as something impossible, but as regards that



desperate struggle without seeing any light, I know it too, how awful it is. With all one's energy one can do nothing and thinks oneself mad, and I don't know what else. When I was in London, how often I would stand on the Thames Embankment and draw as I made my way home from Southampton Street in the evening, and it looked terrible. If only there had been someone then who had told me what perspective was, how much misery I would have been spared, how much further along I would be now. Well, *fait accompli* is *fait accompli*. It didn't happen then — I did talk to Thijs Maris occasionally (I didn't dare speak to Boughton, because I felt such great respect in his presence) but I didn't find it there either, that helping me with the *first* things, with the ABC.

Let me now repeat that I believe in you as an artist, and that you can still become one, indeed that you should very soon think calmly about whether you are one or not, whether you would be able to produce something or not if you learned to spell the aforementioned ABC, and then also spent some time walking through the wheatfield and the heath, in order to renew once more what you yourself say, 'I used to be part of that nature, now I don't feel that any more'. Let me tell you, brother, that I myself have felt so deeply, deeply *that* which you say there. That I've had a time of nervous, barren stress when I had days when I couldn't find the most beautiful countryside beautiful, precisely because I didn't feel myself part of it. That's what pavements and the office — and care — and nerves — do.

Don't take it amiss if I say now that your soul is sick at this moment — it really is — it isn't good that you aren't part of nature — and I think that No. 1 now is for you to make that normal again. I think it's very good that you yourself feel the difference between your state of mind now and in other years. And don't doubt that you will agree with me that you must work on it to put it right.

I now have to look back into my own past to see what the matter was, spending years in that stony, barren state of mind and trying to emerge from it, and yet it got worse and worse instead of better.

Not only did I feel indifferent instead of responsive to nature but also, which was much worse, I felt exactly the same about people.

People said that I was going mad; I myself felt that I wasn't, if only because I felt my own malady very deep inside myself and tried to get over it again. I made all sorts of forlorn attempts that led to nothing, so be it, but because of that *idée fixe* of getting back to a normal position I never

confused my own desperate doings, scrambling and squirmings with I myself. At least I always felt 'let me just do something, be somewhere, it *must* get better, I'll get over it, let me have the patience to recover'.

I don't believe that someone like Boks, for instance, who really turned out to be mad, thought like that — so I say again, I've thought about it a lot since, about my years of all sorts of scrambling, and I don't see that, given my circumstances, I *could* be other than I have been.

Here is the ground that sank beneath my feet — here is the ground which, if it sinks, must make a person miserable, whoever he may be. I was with G&Cie for 6 years — I had put down roots in G&Cie and I thought that, although I left, I could look back on 6 years of good work, and that if I presented myself somewhere I could refer to my past with equanimity.

But by no means; things are done so hurriedly that little consideration is given, little is questioned or reasoned. People act on the most random, most superficial impressions. And once one is out of G&Cie no one knows who G&Cie is. It's a name like X&Co., without meaning — and so one is simply 'a person without a situation'. All at once — suddenly — fatally — everywhere — there you have it. Of course, precisely because one has a certain respectability one doesn't say I'm so-and-so, I'm this or that. One presents oneself for a new situation serious in all respects, without saying much, with a view to putting one's hand to the plough. Very well, but then, that 'person without a situation', the man from anywhere, gradually becomes suspect.

Suppose that your new employer is a man whose affairs are very mysterious, and suppose that he has just one goal, 'money'. With all your energy, can you really immediately, at once, help him a very great deal in that? Perhaps not, eh? And yet he wants money, money come what may; you want to know something more about the business, and what you see or hear is pretty disgusting.

And soon it's: 'someone without a situation', I don't need you any more. See, now that's what you increasingly become: someone without a situation. Go to England, go to America, it doesn't help at all, you're an uprooted tree everywhere. G&Cie, where your roots are from an early age — G&Cie, although indirectly they cause you this misery because in your youth you regarded them as the finest, the best, the biggest in the world — G&Cie, *were* you to return to them — I didn't do that then — I *couldn't* — my heart was too full, much too full — G&Cie, they'd give you the cold shoulder, say

it was no longer their concern or something. With all this one has been uprooted, and the world turns it around and says that you've uprooted yourself. Fact — your place no longer acknowledges you. *I* felt too melancholy to do anything about it — and I don't remember ever having been in the mood to talk to someone about it as I'm talking to you now. Because, and actually to my surprise, for I thought that even if they did it to me they would, however, certainly not have dared to do it to you, I read in your letter the words 'when I spoke to them this week the gentlemen made it almost impossible for me'. Old chap, you know how it is with me, but if you're miserable about one thing and another, *do not feel you are ALONE*. It's *too much* to bear *alone*, and to some extent I can sympathize with you the way it is. Now, stand your ground and don't let your pain throw you off balance — if the gentlemen behave like this, stand on your dignity and don't accept your dismissal except on terms that guarantee you'll get a new situation. They aren't worth your losing your temper, don't do that, even if *they provoke you*. I lost my temper and walked straight out. Now in my position it was different again from yours; I was one of the least, you are one of the first, but what I say about being uprooted, I'm afraid that you would feel the same if you were out of it, so look at *that*, too, cold-bloodedly, stand up to them and don't let them push you out without being a little prepared for that difficult situation of beginning again. And know this — given an uprooting, given not making headway again, don't despair.

Then, in the worst case, do NOT go to America, because it's exactly the same there as in Paris. No, beware of reaching that point where one says: I'll make myself scarce; I had that myself, I hope that you won't have it. *If* you had it, I say again, beware of it, resist it with great coolness, say to yourself, this point proves to me that I'm running into a brick wall. This is a wall for bulls to run into; I am a bull too, but an intelligent one, I am a bull about becoming an artist. Anyway, get out before you smash your head to pieces, that's all. I'm not saying that that's what *will* happen; I hope that there will be no question whatever of running into a wall. But suppose after all that there was a whirlpool with accompanying sharp-edged rocky promontories, well, I would just think that you might avoid it, wouldn't you? Perhaps you'll admit that those rocks might be there, since you yourself pulled me out of that whirlpool when I had no more hope of getting out of it and was powerless to fight against it any more.

I mean, give those waters a very wide berth. They're beginning to drag you down in that one thing — I say no more nor less than I'm sure of — that you aren't part of nature. Do you think it strange of me that I dare to say as much as this: now, at the very beginning, change course *now* and no later than now in so far as you work at restoring the bond between yourself and nature? The more you remain in the frame of mind of not being part of nature, the more you play into the hands of your eternal enemy (and mine too), Nerves. I have more experience than you of the sort of tricks they *could* play on you. You're now beginning to enter waters that are throwing you off balance, inasmuch as the rapport with nature seems to be broken. Take that very coolly as a sign of aberration; say, oh no, not that way if you please. Seek a new passion, an interest in something; think, for example, after all perspective must fundamentally be the simplest of all things and chiaroscuro a simple, not a complicated matter. It must be something that speaks for itself, otherwise I don't much care for it. Try to get back to nature in this way.

Will you now, old chap, simply take it from me when I say that as I write to you I've got something back of what I had years ago. That I'm again taking pleasure in windmills, for example, that particularly here in Drenthe I feel much as I did then, at the time when I first began to see the beauty in art. You'd be prepared to call that a normal mood, wouldn't you? — finding the outdoor things beautiful, being calm enough to draw them, to paint them. And suppose *you* were to come up against a brick wall somewhere, wouldn't you find someone in my present mood composed enough to want to take a little walk with him, precisely in order to have a distraction from thoughts if, through nervousness, these thoughts start to acquire a certain despairing element? You are yourself and not fundamentally changed, but your nerves are beginning to be unstrung by strain. Now, look after your nerves, and don't take them lightly, because they cause quick-tempered manoeuvres — well, you know a thing or two about that yourself.

Make no mistake, Theo, at this moment Pa, Ma, Wil, Marie, and I above all, are supported by you; it seems to you that you have to go on for our sakes, and believe me I fully understand that, or at least can understand it to a very great extent. Just think about this for a moment. What is your goal and Pa's, Ma's, Wil's, Marie's and mine? What do we all want? We want, acting decently, to keep our heads above water, we all want to arrive at a clear position, not a false position, don't we? This is what we all want,

unanimously and sincerely, however much we differ or don't differ among ourselves. What are we all prepared to do against fate? All, all of us without exception to work quietly, calmly. Am I wrong in regarding the general situation in this way? Very well, what are we facing now? We're confronting a calamity which, touching you, touches us all. Fine. A storm is brewing. We see it brewing. That lightning might well strike us. Fine. What do we do now? Do we reach our wit's end? I don't think that we're inclined that way — even if certain nerves that we all have in our bodies, even if certain fibres of the heart, finer than nerves, are shocked or experience pain.

*We are today what we were yesterday*, even if the lightning strikes or even, perhaps, should it thunder. Are we or are we not the sort who can look at things calmly? That, simply, is the question, and I see no reason why we should *not* be so. What I also see is the following — that our position towards one another is also straight at this moment. That for the purposes of keeping straight it's desirable to have a closer connection, and in my view there are a few things in ourselves that we'll have to work out between us.

In the first place, I would be very pleased if your relationship with Marie were to be put on a firmer footing; in other words a formal engagement if possible.

Secondly, I would consider it desirable that we all understood that circumstances urgently require that Brabant no longer be closed to me. I myself think it better that I do *not* go there unless there's no other choice, but in the event of an emergency the rent that I'm obliged to pay could be saved, because Pa has a house there rent-free.

I'm at a point where there will probably be *some* income from my work soon. And if we could now reduce expenditure to a minimum, even below what it is at present, perhaps I could earn instead of consume, become positive instead of negative.

If it's a question of our *having* to earn, I can see a chance in this way — if there's patience at home, a realization of the necessities, if above all, when it comes to models for me, even the family cooperates. As to the question of models, they'd definitely have to do what I wanted, have to trust that I had my reasons for it. If I were to say to Ma or to Wil or Lies, pose for me, it would have to happen.

I wouldn't make any unreasonable demands, of course. You know how it came about that I left; the fundamental cause was misunderstanding one another, actually in *all* things. So *can* we live together? Yes, for a *time*, if we

*have* to and people on both sides understand that everything has to be subordinated to what *the force majeure* of circumstances dictates. I had hoped that that was understood *at the time*, and I didn't take the initiative to leave — when I was told to go away, though, I went.

Anyway, I broach this because I see that perhaps things will come to pass such that you *must* have your hands free, and if it might help for me to live at home for a while, I think that Pa and I would both have to reconcile ourselves to that immediately. Although if it isn't necessary — so much the better. But I'm not saying that I absolutely *must* be in Drenthe; *where* isn't the most important thing.

So be aware of this, that in that respect I would of course do whatever you thought advisable.

Well, I'll write to Pa today, without more ado, simply this: if Theo were to think it advisable that my expenses should be reduced to a minimum and I should live at home for a while, I hope that both you and I will have the sense *not* to put a spoke in the wheel through mutual discord, but keeping silent about everything that has passed will reconcile ourselves to what circumstances bring. Nothing more about you or about business nor, should I have to live at home, would I talk about you other than in general terms. And for the time being I would certainly *not* mention Marie.

Theo, if you had said perhaps a year ago that you would certainly not become a painter, would certainly stay in your present profession, I would have had to accede; *now* I don't accede so readily, I still see that repeated occurrence in the history of art of the phenomenon of two brothers who are painters. I know that the future is unpredictable, at least I tell you that I don't know how things will turn out. However, it's definitely the case that I believe in you as an artist, and this is actually reinforced by some of the things in your last letter.

Mind now, I advise you of one thing that's urgently necessary — beware of your nerves — use all means to keep your constitution calm. Consult a doctor daily if you possibly can, not so much because a doctor can do anything about it, as much as would be needed, but because the very fact of going to a doctor to talk about it &c. will show you, *this* is nerves, *that* is me.

It's a question here of self-knowledge, of serenity, despite all the tricks that the nerves *must* play. I consider the whole idea that it *could* come to your making yourself scarce to be the effect of nerves. You would do wisely



and well to regard it in this way yourself. I hope that you will *not* bring off a coup, I hope that you will *not* make a financial invention — I hope that you will become a painter. If, through cool aplomb, you can let the crisis now deliberately being created by the gentlemen run off you like water off a duck's back, can say to them 'I am *certainly not* leaving in this way, certainly not *now*, *never* like this' — if you say to them, I have plans but they aren't even of a commercial nature, and as soon as they can be put into effect I'll retire in all tranquillity; until that time, as long as you can't find fault with what I do, leave things as they are, but know that you're very much mistaken in me if you think that I would leave because you make things impossible for me, or would part from you in any unreasonable way. If you want to be rid of me, very well, I also want to be rid of you, but amicably and in good order, and it goes without saying that I must keep going. Anyhow, try to make them understand that you're dead cool and calm and will remain so, however that you have absolutely no desire whatsoever to stay — but that you won't leave until you see a favourable moment. This seems to me to be the way to counter what they're now trying to do, to make it impossible for you to stay. Perhaps they suspect that you've already established relations elsewhere, and in such a case making it impossible for someone to stay can sometimes be very nasty. If they turn nasty now, there's nothing for it, cut it short — perhaps the best thing might be to explain calmly that you would retire on certain conditions.

In the meantime, let me know if I should go home for a while so that you have your hands free. And again, Pa, Ma, Wil, Marie, I, in a word all of us, think much more of *you yourself* than of your money. Making yourself scarce is nothing but sheer nerves.

But — restore — *try* to restore, even if it doesn't happen all at once — the rapport between you and nature and people. And if the only way to do this is to become a painter, well then become one, even if you see ever so many objections and impossibilities.

Now listen — write to me very soon — be sure to do that. With a handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

## Nieuw-Amsterdam, Friday, 2 November 1883

To Theo van Gogh (letter 402)

Dear brother,

Just wanted to tell you about a trip to Zweeloo, the village where Liebermann stayed for a long time and made studies for his painting of the washerwomen at the last Salon.

Where Ter Meulen and Jules Bakhuyzen also spent some time.

Imagine a trip across the heath at 3 o'clock in the morning in an open cart (I went with the man where I lodge, who had to go to the market in Assen). Along a road, or 'diek' as they say here, which they'd put mud on to raise it instead of sand. It was much nicer even than the barge. When it was only just starting to get a little lighter and the cocks were crowing everywhere by the huts scattered over the heath, the few cottages we passed — surrounded by slender poplars whose yellow leaves one could hear falling — an old squat tower in a little churchyard with earth bank and beech hedge, the flat landscapes of heath or wheatfields, everything, everything became just exactly like the most beautiful Corots. A silence, a mystery, a peace as only he has painted.

It was still very dark, though, when we got to Zweeloo at 6 o'clock in the morning — I saw the real Corots even earlier in the morning. The ride into the village was really so beautiful. Huge mossy roofs on houses, barns, sheepfolds, sheds. The dwellings here are very wide, among oak trees of a superb bronze. Tones of golden green in the moss, of reddish or bluish or yellowish dark lilac greys in the soil, tones of inexpressible purity in the green of the little wheatfields. Tones of black in the wet trunks, standing out against golden showers of whirling, swirling autumn leaves, which still hang in loose tufts, as if they were blown there, loosely and with the sky shining through them, on poplars, birches, limes, apple trees. The sky unbroken, clear, illuminating, not white but a lilac that cannot be deciphered, white in which one sees swirling red, blue, yellow, which reflects everything and one feels above one everywhere, which is vaporous and unites with the thin mist below. Brings everything together in a spectrum of delicate greys.

I didn't find a single painter in Zweeloo, though, and the people said they *never* come there *in the winter*. It's *precisely* in the winter that I hope to

be there. Since there were no painters, I decided to walk back and do some drawing on the way instead of waiting for my landlord's return.

So I started to make a sketch of the very apple orchard where Liebermann made his large painting. And then back along the road we had driven down early on. At the moment that area around Zweeloo is entirely given over to young wheat — vast, sometimes, that most tender of tender greens that I know. With above it a sky of a delicate lilac white that gives an effect — I don't think it can be painted, but for me it's the basic tone that one must know in order to know what the basis of other effects is.

A black earth, flat — infinite — a clear sky of delicate lilac white. That earth brings forth that young wheat — it's as if that wheat is a growth of mould. That's what the good, fertile fields of Drenthe are, *au fond* — everything in a vaporous atmosphere. Think of the *Last day of creation* by BRION — well, yesterday I felt that I understood the meaning of that painting.

The poor soil of Drenthe is the same, only the black earth is even blacker — like soot — not a lilac black like the furrows, and melancholically overgrown with eternally rotting heather and peat. I see that everywhere — the chance effects on that infinite background: in the peat bogs the sod huts, in the fertile areas, really primitive hulks of farmhouses and sheepfolds with low, very low walls, and huge mossy roofs. Oaks around them. When one travels for hours and hours through the region, one feels as if there's actually nothing but that infinite earth, that mould of wheat or heather, that infinite sky. Horses, people seem as small as fleas then. One feels nothing any more, however big it may be in itself, one only knows that there is land and sky.

However, in one's capacity as a tiny speck watching other tiny specks — leaving aside the infinite — one discovers that every tiny speck is a Millet. I passed a little old church, just exactly, just exactly the church at Gréville in Millet's little painting in the Luxembourg; but here, instead of the little peasant with the spade in that painting, a shepherd with a flock of sheep came along the hedge. One didn't see through to the sea in the background but only to the sea of young wheat, the sea of furrows instead of that of the waves. The effect produced: the same. I saw ploughmen, very busy now, a sand-cart, shepherds, road workers, dung-carts. In a little inn along the way drew a little old woman at the spinning wheel, little dark silhouette — like something out of a fairy tale — little dark silhouette against a bright window through which one saw the bright sky and a path through the delicate green and a few geese cropping the grass.

And then, when dusk fell — imagine the silence, the peace of that moment! Imagine, right then, an avenue of tall poplars with the autumn leaves, imagine a broad muddy road, all black mud with the endless heath on the right, the endless heath on the left, a few black, triangular silhouettes of sod huts, with the red glow of the fire shining through the tiny windows, with a few pools of dirty, yellowish water that reflect the sky, where bogwood trunks lie rotting. Imagine this muddy mess in the evening twilight with a whitish sky above, so everything black on white. And in this muddy mess a rough figure — the shepherd — a throng of oval masses, half wool, half mud, that bump into one another, jostle one another — the flock. You see it coming — you stand in the midst of it — you turn round and follow them.

With difficulty and reluctantly they progress along the muddy road. Still, there's the farm in the distance — a few mossy roofs and piles of straw and peat between the poplars. Again the sheepfold is like a triangle in silhouette. Dark.

The door stands wide open like the entrance to a dark cave. The light from the sky behind shines through the cracks in the boards at the back. The whole caravan of masses of wool and mud disappears into this cave — the shepherd and a woman with a lantern shut the doors behind them.

That return of the flock in the dusk was the finale of the symphony that I heard yesterday. That day passed like a dream, I had been so immersed in that heart-rending music all day that I had literally forgotten even to eat and drink — I took a slice of coarse peasant bread and a cup of coffee at the little inn where I drew the spinning wheel. The day was over, and from dawn to dusk, or rather from one night to the other night, I had forgotten myself in that symphony. I came home and, sitting by the fire, it occurred to me that I was hungry, and I found I was terribly hungry. But that's how it is here. One feels exactly as if one had been at an exhibition of one hundred masterpieces, for example. What does one get out of a day like that? Just a few scratches. And yet one gets something else out of it, too — a calm passion for work.

Above all, do write to me soon. It's Friday today but your letter isn't here yet; I'm looking forward to it eagerly. It takes time to get it changed, since it has to go back to Hoogeveen again and then back here again. We don't know how it will work out, but apart from that I would *now* say — the

simplest thing perhaps would be to send money once a month. In any event write again soon. With a handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

## **Nuenen, on or about Friday, 7 December 1883**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 410)

My dear Theo,

I lay awake half the night, Theo, after I'd written to you yesterday evening.

I'm heartbroken about the fact that when I come back now, after an absence of two years, the reception at home was as friendly and kind as could be, yet at bottom nothing, nothing, nothing has changed in what I have to call blindness and stupidity to the point of desperation when it comes to understanding the situation. Which was that we were going along in the very best of ways until the moment when Pa banned me from the house — not just in a passion but also 'because he was tired of it'. It should have been understood then that this was something so important to my succeeding or not succeeding that it was made ten times more difficult for me because of it — almost intolerable.

If I hadn't felt the same then as I feel again now, that despite all the good intentions, despite all the friendliness of the reception, despite whatever you will, there's a certain steely hardness and icy coldness, something in Pa that grates like dry sand, glass or tin — despite all his outward mildness — if I hadn't already, I say, felt it then as I do now, I wouldn't have taken it so badly then. Now I'm once again in almost unbearable indecision and inner conflict.

You understand that I wouldn't write as I write — having undertaken the journey here of my own volition, having been the first to swallow my pride — if there wasn't really something I'm running up against.

If I had now seen that there was any WILLINGNESS to do as the Rappards did with the best results and as we began here, also with good results, if I had now seen that Pa had also realized that he should *not* have barred the house to me, I would have been reassured about the future.

Nothing, nothing of all that. There wasn't then, nor is there now any trace, any hint of a shadow of a doubt in Pa as to whether he did the right thing then.

Pa doesn't know remorse as you and I and everyone who is human does. Pa believes in his own righteousness while you, I and other human beings are permeated with the feeling that we *consist* of mistakes and forlorn attempts.

I pity people like Pa, *I can't find it in my heart to be angry with them* because I believe that they're unhappier than I am myself. Why do I think they're unhappier? Because they use even the good in them wrongly so that it works as evil — because the *light* that's in them is black — spreads darkness, gloom around them. Their friendly reception desolates me — to me, the way they *make the best of it*, without recognizing the mistake, is even worse, if possible, than the mistake itself.

Instead of readily understanding and consequently promoting both my and indirectly their own well-being with a degree of fervour, I sense a procrastination and hesitancy in everything, which paralyzes my own passion and energy like a leaden atmosphere.

My intellect as a man tells me that I have to regard it as an unalterable fact of fate that Pa and I are irreconcilable down to the deepest depths. My compassion both for Pa and for myself tells me 'irreconcilable? *never*' — until eternity there's a chance, one has to believe in the chance of an ultimate reconciliation. But the latter, oh why is it sadly probably 'an illusion'?

Will you think that I'm making too much of things? Our life is an awful reality and we ourselves go on into eternity, what is — is — and our view, weighty or less weighty, takes nothing from and adds nothing to the essence of things.

That's how I think about it when I'm lying awake at night, for instance, or that's how I think about it in the storm in the sad twilight in the evening on the heath.

Perhaps I sometimes appear as insensitive as a wild pig during the day in everyday life, and I can readily understand that people find *me* coarse. When I was younger I used to think much more than now that the problem lay in coincidences or little things or misunderstandings that were groundless. But as I get older I draw back from that more and more, and I see deeper grounds. Life's 'an odd thing', brother.

You can see how up and down my letters are, first I think *it's possible*, then again *it's impossible*. One thing is clear to me, that it doesn't happen *readily*, as I said, that there's no 'willingness'. I've decided to go to Rappard and tell him that I would like it too if I could be at home, but that against all the advantages that this would have there's a *je ne sais quoi* with Pa that I'm afraid I'm beginning to think is incurable, and that makes me apathetic and powerless.

Yesterday evening it's decided that I'll be here for a while, the next morning, despite everything, we're back to — let's think about it again. Go ahead, sleep on it, think about it!!! *As if they* HADN'T HAD 2 YEARS to think about it, OUGHT to have thought about it as a matter of course, as the natural thing.

Two years, every day a day of worry for me, for them — normal life — as if nothing had happened or nothing would happen. The burden didn't weigh on them. You say, they don't express it but they feel it. I DON'T BELIEVE THAT. I've sometimes thought it myself, but it's *not right*.

People *act* AS they FEEL. Our ACTIONS, our swift readiness or our hesitation, *that's how we can be recognized* — not by what we say with our lips — friendly or unfriendly. Good intentions, opinions, in fact that's *less than nothing*.

You may think of me what you will, Theo, but I tell you it's not my imagination, I tell you, *Pa is not willing*.

I see now what I saw *then*, I spoke out four-square AGAINST Pa then, I speak now *in any event*, whatever may come of it, AGAINST PA again, as being UNwilling, as making it IMPOSSIBLE. It's damned sad, brother, the Rappards acted intelligently, but here!!!!!! And everything you did and do about it, 3/4 of it is rendered fruitless by *them*. It's wretched, brother. With a handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

I don't care so much about a friendly or unfriendly reception, what grieves me is that they aren't sorry for what they did then. They think *that* THEY DIDN'T DO ANYTHING *then*, and for me that's going too far.

**Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 15 December 1883**



## To Theo van Gogh (letter 413)

Dear brother,

I feel what Pa and Ma *instinctively* think about me (I don't say *reasonably*).

There's a similar reluctance about taking me into the house as there would be about having a large, shaggy dog in the house. He'll come into the room with wet paws — and then, he's so shaggy. He'll get in everyone's way. *And he barks so loudly.*

In short — it's a dirty animal.

Very well — but the animal has a human history and, although it's a dog, a human soul, and one with finer feelings at that, able to feel what people think about him, which an ordinary dog can't do.

And I, admitting that I am a sort of dog, accept them as they are.

This home is also too good for me, and Pa and Ma and the family are so unduly fine (no feelings, though) and — and — they are ministers — many ministers. So the dog recognizes that if they were to keep him it would be too much a question of putting up with him, of tolerating him 'IN THIS HOUSE', so he'll see about finding himself a kennel somewhere else.

The dog may actually have been Pa's son at one time, and Pa himself really left him out in the street rather too much, where he inevitably became rougher, but since Pa himself forgot that years ago and actually never thought *profoundly* about what a bond between father and son meant, there's nothing to be said.

Then — the dog might perhaps bite — if he were to go mad — and the village constable would have to come round and shoot him dead. Very well — yes, all that, most certainly, it *is* true.

On the other hand, dogs are guards. But there's no need for that, it's peace, and there's no danger, there are no problems, they say. So then I keep silent.

The dog is just sorry that he didn't stay away, because it wasn't as lonely on the heath as it is in this house — despite all the friendliness. The animal's visit was a weakness that I hope people will forget, and one that he'll avoid lapsing into again.

Since I've had no expenses in the time I've been here, and because I received money from you twice here, I paid for the journey myself and also paid myself for the clothes that Pa bought because mine weren't good

enough, yet at the same time I've repaid the 25 guilders from friend Rappard.

I think you'll be pleased that this has been done, it looked so careless.

Dear Theo,

Enclosed is the letter I was engaged in writing when I received your letter. To which, having read what you say attentively, I want to reply. I'll start by saying that I think it noble of you, believing that I'm *making it difficult* for Pa, to take his part and give me a brisk telling-off.

I regard this as something that I value in you, even though you're taking up arms against someone who is neither Pa's enemy nor yours, but who definitely does, however, give Pa and you some serious questions to consider. Telling you what I tell you, that being what I feel, and asking: why is this so?

In many respects, moreover, your answers to various passages in my letter make me see sides to the questions that aren't unfamiliar to me either. Your objections are in part my own objections, but not sufficiently. So I see once more your good will, your desire at the same time to achieve reconciliation and peace — which indeed I don't doubt. But brother, I could also raise very many objections to your tips, only I think that would be a long-drawn-out way and that there's a shorter way.

There's a desire for peace and for reconciliation in Pa and in you and in me. And yet we don't seem to be able to bring peace about. I now believe that I'm the stumbling block, and so I must try to work something out so that I don't '*make it difficult*' for you or for Pa any more.

I'm now prepared to make it as easy as possible, as tranquil as possible, for both Pa and you.

So you also think that it's I who *make it difficult* for Pa and that I'm *cowardly*. So — well then, I'll try to keep everything shut up inside me, away from Pa and from you. What's more, I won't visit Pa again, and I'll stick to my proposal (for the sake of mutual freedom of thought, for the sake of *not making it DIFFICULT for you either*, which I fear is already inadvertently starting to be your opinion) to put an end to our agreement about the money by March, if you approve.

I'm deliberately leaving an interval for the sake of order and so that I'll have time to take some steps that really have very little chance of success, but which my conscience won't allow me to postpone in the circumstances.

You must accept this calmly and accept it with good grace, brother — it isn't giving you an ultimatum. But if our feelings diverge too far, well then, we mustn't force ourselves to act as if nothing is happening. Isn't this your opinion too, to some extent?

You know very well, don't you, that I consider that *you've saved my life*, that I shall NEVER forget, I'm not only your brother, your friend, *even after we put an end* to relations that I fear would create a false position, but at the same time I have an *infinite* obligation of loyalty for what you did in the past by stretching out your hand to me and by continuing to help me.

Money *can* be repaid, not kindness such as yours.

So let me get on with it — only I'm disappointed that a thoroughgoing reconciliation hasn't come about now — and I'd wish that it still could, only you people don't understand me and I fear that perhaps you *never* will. Send me the usual by return, if you can, *then I won't have to ask Pa for anything* when I leave, which I ought to do as soon as possible.

I gave the whole of the 23.80 guilders of 1 Dec. to Pa

(having borrowed 14 guilders, and shoes and trousers came to 9 guilders)

„ „ „ „ „ 25 „ „ 10 „ „ Rappard.

I only have a quarter and a few cents in my pocket. So that is the account, which you will now understand when, in addition, you know that from the 20 Nov. money, which came 1 Dec., I paid for the lodgings in Drenthe for a long period, because there had been some hitch then that was later put right, and from the 14 guilders (which I borrowed from Pa and have since given back) I paid for my journey etc.

I'm going from here to Rappard's.

And from Rappard's perhaps to Mauve's. My plan, then, is to try to do everything in calmness, in order.

There's too much in my frankly expressed opinion about Pa that I cannot take back in the circumstances. I appreciate your objections, but many of them I cannot regard as sufficient, others I already thought of myself, even though I wrote what I wrote.

I set out my feelings in strong words, and of course they're modified by appreciation of very much that's good in Pa — of course that modification is considerable.

Let me tell you that I didn't know that someone aged 30 was 'a boy', particularly not when he may have experienced more than just anyone in

those 30 years. Regard my words as the words of a boy if you wish, though.

I am not liable for your interpretation of what I say, am I? *That* is your business.

As to Pa, I'll also take the liberty of putting what he thinks out of my mind as soon as we part company.

It may be politic to keep what one thinks to oneself, however it has always seemed to me that a painter, above all, had a duty to be sincere — you yourself once pointed out to me that whether people understand what I say, whether people judge me rightly or wrongly, didn't alter the truth about me.

Well brother, know that, even if there's any sort of a separation, I am, perhaps *much more even than you know or feel*, your friend and even Pa's friend. With a handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

In any event I'm not an enemy of Pa's or yours, nor shall ever be *that*.

I've thought again about your remarks since I wrote the enclosed letter, and I've also spoken to Pa again. I had as good as definitely made up my mind not to stay here — regardless of how it would be taken or what might come of it — when, though, the conversation took a turn because I said: I've been here for a fortnight now and I don't feel any further forward than in the first half hour. If only we'd understood each other better we'd have got all sorts of things sorted out and settled by now — I can't waste time and I have to decide.

A door has to be open or shut. I don't understand anything in between, and in fact it can't exist. It has now ended up that the little room at home where the mangle is now will be at my disposal as a storeroom for my bits and pieces, as a studio too, should circumstances make this desirable. And that they've now started emptying the room, which wasn't the case at first, when the case was still pending then.

I do want to tell you something that I've since understood better than when I wrote to you about what I thought of Pa. I've softened my opinion, partly because I believe I detect in Pa (and one of your tips would support this to some extent) signs that, indeed, he can't follow me when I try to explain something. Gets stuck in *part* of what I say, which becomes wrong

when it's taken out of context. There may well be more than one reason for this, but old age is certainly to blame for a large part of it. Now, I respect old age and its weaknesses too, *as you do, even* though it may not seem so to you or you may not believe it of me. I mean that I probably humour Pa in some things that I would take amiss in a man with his full faculties — for the aforementioned reason.

I also thought of Michelet's saying (which he had from a zoologist), 'the male is very wild'. And because now, at this stage in my life, I know that I have strong passions, and so I should have, in my opinion — looking at myself I see that perhaps I am 'very wild'. And yet, my passion abates when I'm faced with one who is weaker; then I don't fight.

Although, for that matter, taking issue in *words* or about principles with a man who, mark you, occupies a position in society concerned with guiding people's spiritual lives is, to be sure, not only permitted but cannot in any way be cowardly. For after all, our weapons are equal. Give this some thought, if you will, particularly since I tell you that, for many reasons, I want to give up even the battle of words because I sometimes think that Pa is no longer able to concentrate the full force of his thoughts on a single point.

In some cases, after all, a man's age may be an added strength.

Going to the heart of the matter, I take this opportunity to tell you that I believe that it's precisely because of Pa's influence that you've concentrated more on business than was in your nature.

And that I believe that, even though you're now so sure of your case that you must remain a dealer, a certain something in your original nature will still *keep on working* and perhaps react more than you expect.

Since I know that our thoughts crossed each other in our first years with G&Cie, that is that both you and I thought then about becoming painters, but so deeply that we didn't dare to say it straight out then, even to each other, it could well be that in these later years we draw closer together. All the more so because of the effect of circumstances and conditions in the trade itself, which in the meantime has already changed compared with our early days and, in my view, will go on changing more and more.

I forced myself *so much* at the time, and I was so burdened by a conviction that I was certainly not a painter that, *even when I left G&Cie*, I didn't turn my thoughts to it but to something else (which was in turn a second mistake, over and above the first). Being discouraged then about the possibility, because diffident, very diffident approaches to a few painters

weren't even noticed. What I'm telling you is not because I want to *force* you to think like me — I force no one — I'm just telling you it in brotherly, in friendly confidence.

My views may sometimes be out of proportion; that may be so. Yet I believe that there *must* be some truth in the nature of them, and in the action and direction. That I myself have now worked on getting the house here open again, even to the extent of having a studio here — I'm not doing it in the first place or primarily out of self-interest.

In this I see that even though we don't understand each other in many things, there's always a will to cooperate between you, Pa and myself, albeit in fits and starts. Since the estrangement has already lasted so long, it can't do any harm to try to place some weight on the other side, so that we shouldn't appear to the world, too, as being more divided than is the case, so as not to lapse into extremes in the eyes of the world.

Rappard says to me, 'a human being isn't a lump of peat, in so far as a human being can't bear to be thrown up in the loft like a lump of peat and be forgotten there' — and he points out that he thought it a great misfortune for me that I couldn't be at home. Give this some thought, if you will. I believe that it has been regarded a little too much as if I acted capriciously or recklessly or, well, you know it better than I do, whereas I was more or less forced into things, and could do nothing other than what they wanted to see in it.

And it was precisely the biased view of seeing base objectives &c. in me that made me very cold and fairly indifferent towards many people.

Brother, once again — think a great deal at this stage in your life; I believe that you're in danger of taking a distorted view of many things, and I believe that you should examine your life's aim once more, and that then *your life* WILL BE BETTER. I don't say it as if I knew it and as if you didn't know it, I say it because I'm increasingly coming to see that it's so terribly difficult to know where one is right and where one is wrong.

## **Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 18 March 1884**

To Anthon van Rappard (letter 439)

My dear friend Rappard,

Thank you for your letter — which made me happy. I was pleased that you saw something in my drawings.

I won't go into generalities about technique, but I do foresee that, precisely when I become stronger in what I'll call *power of expression* than I am at this moment, people will say, not *less* but in fact *even more* than now, that I have *no* technique. Consequently — I'm in complete agreement with you that I must say even *more forcibly* what I'm saying in my present work — and I'm toiling away to strengthen myself in this respect — but — that the general public will understand it better *then* — no.

All the same, in my view that doesn't alter the fact that the reasoning of the good man who asked about your work, 'does he paint for money?', is the reasoning of a moaner — since this intelligent creature counts it among the axioms that originality prevents one from earning money with one's work.

Passing this off as an AXIOM, *because* it can decidedly *not* be proved as a *proposition* is, as I said — the usual trick of moaners — and *lazy* little Jesuits.

Do you think that I don't care about technique or am not searching for it? I do — but only to the extent that — I want to say what I have to say — and where I can't do it yet, or not well enough, I work on it to improve myself. But I don't give a damn whether my language squares with that of these orators — (you know you made the comparison — if someone had something useful, true — necessary to say, and said it in terms that were difficult to understand, what good would it be to either speaker or audience?).

I want to stay with this point for a moment — precisely because I've often come across a rather curious historical phenomenon.

Let it be clearly understood: that one must speak in the audience's mother tongue if that audience only speaks one language — that goes without saying, and it would be absurd not to take it as read.

But now the second part of the question. Given a man who has something to say and speaks in the language that his audience is also naturally familiar with.

Then — the phenomenon that the *speaker of truth* has little *oratorical chic* will manifest itself time and time again — and does *not* appeal to the *majority* of his audience — indeed is branded a man 'slow of speech' and *despised* as such.



He may consider himself lucky if there is one, or a very few at most, who are edified by him, because these listeners weren't concerned with oratorical tirades but precisely, effectively with — the truth, usefulness, necessity of the words, which enlightened, broadened them, made them freer or more intelligent.

And now the painters — is the purpose and *non plus ultra* of art those singular *spots* of colour — that waywardness in the drawing, that which is called distinction of technique? Certainly not. If one takes a Corot, a Daubigny, a Dupré, a Millet or an Israëls — fellows who are certainly the great forerunners — their work is BEYOND THE PAINT, it stands apart from the chic fellows, just as an oratorical tirade (by, say, a Numa Roumestan) is something very different from a prayer or — a good poem.

*One* MUST therefore *work* on technique in so far as one must say what one feels better, more accurately, more profoundly, but — with the less verbiage the better. But the rest — one needn't occupy oneself with it.

Why I say this is because I believe I've observed that you sometimes think things in your own work aren't good, which to my mind are good. In my view, *your* technique is better than, say, Haverman's — because already your brushstroke often has something singular, distinctive, reasoned and deliberate about it, which in Haverman is endless convention, always redolent of the *studio*, not of nature.

Those sketches of yours that I saw, for instance, the little weaver and the old women of Terschelling, appeal to me — they get to the heart of things. I get little but malaise and boredom from Haverman.

I'm afraid that in the future, too — and I *congratulate* you on it — you will ALSO hear the same comments about technique, as well as about subject and..... everything, in fact, even when that brushstroke of yours, which already has so much character, gets even more.

*There are however* art lovers who do, after all, appreciate precisely those things that have been painted with emotion.

Although we're no longer in the days of *Thoré* and of Théophile Gautier — alas. Just think about whether it's wise, particularly nowadays, to talk a lot about technique — you'll say I'm doing that here myself — actually I do regret it.

But for my part, I intend to tell people consistently *that I can't paint*, even when I've mastered my brush much better than now. You understand?

— *especially then*, when I really will have an individual manner, more finished and even more concise than now.

I liked what Herkomer said when he opened his own art school — for a number of people *who could already paint* — he kindly asked his students if they would be so good as to *not* want to paint like him — but according to their own nature — I am concerned, he says, with setting originality free — not with winning disciples for Herkomer's *doctrine*.

*Lions do not ape one another.*

Well, I've painted quite a lot these last few days, a seated girl winding shuttles for the weavers, and the figure of the weaver separately.

I'm longing for you to see my painted studies sometime — not because I'm satisfied with them myself, but because I believe that you'll be convinced by them that I really am exercising my hand and, when I say I care relatively little for technique, it's not because I'm saving myself trouble or trying to avoid difficulties. Because that's not my system.

I'm also longing for you to get to know this corner of Brabant sometime — much more beautiful than the Breda side in my view. It's delightful here at the moment.

There's a village here — *Son en Breugel*, which is amazingly like Courrières, where the Bretons live — yet the figures over there are at least as beautiful. As one starts to appreciate the *form* more, one sometimes takes a dislike to — 'the Dutch traditional costumes', as they're called on the photograph albums that they sell to foreigners.

I'm sending you herewith a little booklet about Corot — which I think you'll enjoy reading if you don't know it — there are several accurate biographical details in it. I saw the exhibition at the time, for which this is the catalogue.

What's remarkable in it is that that man ripened and matured for so long. Just look at what he did at different times in his life. I've seen examples of his first ACTUAL work — itself the result of years of study — honest as the day is long, thoroughly sound — but how people must have despised it! Corot's *studies* were a lesson to me when I saw them, and was already struck at the time by the difference from studies by many other landscape painters.

If I didn't see *more technique* in *your* little peasant cemetery than in Corot's studies — I'd liken it to them. In sentiment it's identical — an endeavour to express only the intimate and the essential.

What I'm saying in this letter amounts to this — let's try to get the hang of the secrets of technique so well that people are taken in and swear by all that's holy that we have no technique.

Let the work be so skilful that it *seems* naive and doesn't stink of our cleverness.

I don't believe that *I* have reached this desirable point *yet*, for I don't even believe that *you*, who are further on than I am, are already there.

I believe you'll see more in this letter than nitpicking about words.

I believe that the more one has to do with nature itself — the deeper one penetrates into it — the less attraction one sees in all these studio tricks, and yet, I do want to take them as they are and *see* them painting. I would really like to spend a lot of time in studios.

Not in the books have I found it  
And from the 'learned' — oh, little learned

is in De Génestet, as you know. One might say as a variant on this,

Not in the studio have I found it  
And from the painters the connoisseurs } oh, little learned.

Perhaps my inserting painters or connoisseurs as equals shocks you.

But changing the subject — it's devilishly difficult to feel nothing, not to be affected by what such moaners as 'does he paint for money' say. One hears that rot day in and day out, and later one gets angry with oneself for having taken any notice of it. That's how it is with me — and I think that it must occasionally be the same with you. One doesn't give a damn about it, but all the same it gets on one's nerves — like when one hears someone singing off-key or *is pursued by a barrel-organ with a grudge against you*. Don't you think that's true about the barrel-organ, and also that it seems to pick on you specifically?

For wherever one goes, it's the same old tune everywhere.

Oh, as to me — I'm going to do what I tell you — when people say this and that to me — I'm going to finish their sentences before they do — in the same way as, when I know someone is in the habit of offering me a finger instead of a hand (I pulled it off yesterday with a venerable colleague of my father's), I for my part also have one finger ready and, keeping a straight face, carefully touch his with it when shaking hands — in a way that the man

*can't* say anything about it but realizes I'm bloody well getting my own back on him.

Well, I've recently made somebody very angry with something of the sort — does one lose anything by it? No, for in truth these people are a hindrance, and the fact that I write to you about some expressions you use is to ask you: are you sure that those who are praising technique to the skies are in good faith? I just ask it precisely because *I know that your aim is to avoid studio chic*.

## **Nuenen, on or about Monday, 24 March 1884**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 442)

My dear Theo,

Because it's *possible* that you didn't properly understand what I asked you before, and so that there can't be any question later of having misunderstood something or anything like that, I say it again.

At the end of January or beginning of February I wrote to you that, on coming home, it became all too evident to me that the money which I usually received from you was regarded firstly as something PRECARIOUS, secondly as, yes, what I'll call a gift of charity to a poor nincompoop. While I could observe that this opinion was even imparted to people who have absolutely *nothing* to do with it — for instance the respectable natives of these parts — and, for example, 3 times in one week I heard people who were then complete strangers to me ask, 'why is it that you don't sell?' Just how pleasant everyday life is when one sees this all the time, I leave to you.

In addition to this, I had already made up my mind this summer — on account of your letting me feel the reins then, that it was in my interests to go along with this and that — just to let you feel that, for my part, if you made it difficult for me by fiddling with those reins a lot, *I would leave the reins in your hands but not be on the end of them myself* — in other words — if I'm not at liberty in my private life, I decline this allowance from you. In short that my *work* (*not my private life*) should be what determined whether or not I stayed on my feet financially, at least as far as the 150 francs are concerned. Summing these things up, I said in a letter at the end of

January that I didn't want to keep it exactly as it was until today, namely *without* any specific agreement.

That I would like, though — would even like very much — nothing better than that — to go on in the same way, provided there's a specific agreement about supplying work.

And that to try this out I would send one thing and another by March.

Your answer was evasive, it certainly wasn't something forthright like: Vincent, I appreciate all these complaints and I approve of us coming to an agreement that you will send me drawings monthly which you can consider as the equivalent of the 150 francs that I usually send you, so that you can consider this money as money earned. I most certainly noticed that you simply did *not* write anything like the above.

Well, I thought, I'll send one thing and another by March anyway and see how it goes. I then sent 9 watercolours and 5 pen drawings, wrote to tell you that I had a 6th pen drawing as well, and the painted study of the old tower that you had especially wished for at one time. But now that I see that your expressions remain *just as vague*, I can do nothing other than say to you most decidedly that this is no way to behave.

As far as my work is concerned, up to now it was indeed apparently the case that you would rather I didn't send something than that I did.

If that's still the case — well, then in my view either I'm not worthy of your patronage or you think only too flippantly about my drawings.

*I have still not withdrawn* my proposal for a regular supply of work. When I speak of the fact that I want to be able to consider the 150 francs or whatever it may be, more or less as the equivalent of what I send you, *in this respect* it's still a very private affair, and we leave aside altogether the question of whether or not my work has *commercial* value.

But then I'm more justified in the view of Tom, Dick and Harry, whom I don't have to anticipate accusing me of living off private means or — *absolutely* regarding me as '*having NO means of support*'.

At the same time, it's a sign of confidence in my future on your part, which I most certainly won't try to *force* on you, though — and I tell you again that whatever you decide in this matter won't change the past, and that I *most certainly won't* ignore your help in the past and really will appreciate it.

But you have to decide entirely of your own accord whether or not our relationship will endure in the future — for the current year, say.

I end with the assurance, though, that if you refuse to enter into my proposal to supply you with work regularly (you can do whatever you like with that work as regards whether or not you deal in it, although I do in any event insist that you show it from time to time as you already did at the very outset, and rightly to my mind) then I would go ahead with a separation. It seems to me that honour is at stake — so EITHER *this change* OR — *finished*.  
Regards.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

What I prefer not to hear later would be that this or that agreement is more a notion of mine than the intention of the other side, namely yours. You know that you told me C.M. said something of the sort to you about me this summer. As a result I learned that it was important to dot the i's and cross the t's where agreements are concerned.

I believe, because I already wrote to you repeatedly about this change, that by now summing it up once again, everything has been explained plainly and clearly enough, and that for my part I may also ask for a plain yes or a plain no.

The reason I haven't sent you the 6th pen drawing yet is because, just as I insist that you show my work now and then, I'll also occasionally let Rappard see some of my things from now on, since he knows quite a few people — and that drawing was with R. at the time and I should have got it back, but he still has it along with two other '*winter garden*' pen drawings.

Well then, I've already dropped you a line about the painted study in a previous letter, that I was discouraged from sending it because if you don't see anything in the ones from Drenthe I don't think you'll like this one either. It seems to me — as I recall — that among the ones from Drenthe there are some that I would do precisely the same way if I had to do them again.

For the current month I already had the following drawings, *Winter garden* — *Pollard birches* — *Avenue of poplars* — the *Kingfisher*, which I would otherwise have sent you in April.

**Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 16 September 1884**

## To Theo van Gogh (letter 456)

My dear Theo,

You're quite right to ask why I haven't replied to you yet. I did indeed receive your letter with 150 francs enclosed. I began a letter to you, chiefly to thank you because you seemed to have understood my letter, and also to tell you that I only *count* on 100 francs, but actually find it hard to manage on it as long as things don't progress. But nevertheless, if it's 150 francs, there's a 50 francs windfall extra in so far as our *very first* agreement BEFORE *The Hague* was only 100 francs, and if we're only half good friends I wouldn't want to accept more.

However, I couldn't finish that letter, and since then I've wanted to write to you but I haven't been able to find the right words. Something has happened, Theo, which most of the people here know or suspect *nothing* about — nor may ever know, so keep as silent as the grave about it — but which is terrible. To tell you everything I'd have to write a book — I can't do that. Miss Begemann has taken poison — in a moment of despair, when she'd spoken to her family and people spoke ill of her and me, and she became so upset that she did it, in my view, in a moment of definite *mania*. Theo, I had already consulted a doctor once about certain symptoms she had. 3 days before I'd warned her brother in confidence that I was afraid she would have a nervous breakdown, and that to my regret I had to state that I believed that the B. family had acted extremely imprudently by speaking to her as they did.

Well, this didn't help, to the extent that the people put me off for two years, and I most definitely wouldn't accept this since I said, *if* there's a question of marriage here it would have to be very soon or not at all.

Well Theo, you've read Mme Bovary; do you remember the FIRST Mme Bovary, who died of a nervous fit? It was something like that here, but complicated here by taking poison. She had often said to me when we were taking a quiet walk or something, 'I wish I could die now' — I'd never paid attention to it.

One morning, though, she fell to the ground. I still only thought it was a little weakness. But it got worse and worse. Cramps, she lost the power of speech and mumbled all sorts of only half-comprehensible things, collapsed with all sorts of convulsions, cramps etc. It was different from a nervous fit although it was very like one, and I was suddenly suspicious and said —



have you taken something by any chance? She screamed ‘Yes!’ Well, I acted boldly. She wanted me to swear I’d never tell anyone about it — I said, fine, I’ll swear anything you want, but on condition that you vomit that stuff up straightaway — stick your finger down your throat until you vomit, otherwise I’ll call the others. Anyway, you understand the rest. The vomiting only half worked and I went with her to her brother Louis, and told Louis, and got him to give her an emetic, and I went straight to Eindhoven, to Dr van de Loo. It was *strychnine* that she took, but the dose must have been too small, or she may have taken chloroform or laudanum with it to numb herself, which would actually be an antidote to strychnine. But, in short, she then quickly took the antidote that Van de Loo prescribed. No one knows except her herself, Louis B., you, Dr van de Loo and me — and she was rushed straight to a doctor in Utrecht, and it’s been put about that she’s on a trip for the firm, which she was about to embark on anyway. I believe it’s *probable* that she’ll make a full recovery, but in my view there will certainly be a long period of nervous trouble, and in what form this will manifest itself — more serious or less serious — is very much the question. But she’s in good hands now. Still, you’ll understand how depressed I am because of this event.

It was such a dreadful fright, old chap; we were alone in the field when I heard that. But fortunately at least the *poison* has worn off now.

But what sort of a position is it, then, and what sort of a religion is it that these respectable people subscribe to? Oh, they’re simply *absurd* things and they make society into a sort of madhouse, into an upside-down, wrong world. Oh, that mysticism.

You understand that in these last few days everything, everything passed through my mind, and I was absorbed in this sad story. Now she’s tried this and it has *not* succeeded, I think she’s had such a shock that she won’t lightly try for the second time — a failed suicide is the best remedy for suicide in the future. But if she has a nervous breakdown or brain fever or something, then — — — Still, everything’s gone *fairly* well with her these first few days — only I fear there’ll be repercussions. Theo — old chap — I’m so upset by it. Regards, do drop me a line, because I’m speaking to NO ONE here.

Adieu,  
Vincent

Do you remember that first Mme Bovary?

## Nuenen, on or about Monday, 2 March 1885

To Theo van Gogh (letter 484)

My dear Theo,

Thanks for the prompt dispatch of the money for this month, arriving promptly like that actually helps me more. Thanks, too, for the splendid woodcut after Lhermitte — one of the *few* things by him that I know, for I saw only these — a troop of girls in the wheat — an old woman in church — and a miner or some such in a little bar, and Harvest by him, and otherwise never anything, and nothing ever as much reflecting his actual manner as these woodcutters.

If Le Monde Illustré prints a composition by him every month — this is part of a series of ‘Rural months’ — it would give me mighty great pleasure to collect this whole series, and I’d really like you to send them every time.

Because obviously I never see anything here, and after all I do need to see something really beautiful now and then, and so another time feel free to keep back 20 francs, say, but send me things like this when they appear in the illustrated magazines.

Now as to when you write that if I had something ready that I thought was good, you would try to enter it for the Salon — I appreciate your wanting to do this.

This in the first place — and then further that if I’d known it 6 weeks earlier, I would have tried to send you something for this purpose.

Now, though, I don’t have anything that I would care to send in. Recently, as you know, I’ve painted heads almost exclusively. And they are *studies* in the true meaning of the word — that is, they’re meant for the studio.

Nonetheless, this very day I’ve started to make some that I’ll send you.

Because I think it possible that it might be of use, when you meet a good many people on the occasion of the Salon, if you had something you could show — albeit only *studies*.

So you’ll receive heads of an old and a young woman, and probably more than one of these two models. Given what you write of your feelings about various conceptions of heads, I think that these, which come straight

out of a cottage with a moss-grown thatched roof, won't appear to you to be absolutely inappropriate, although they're studies and nothing else. If I'd known 6 weeks earlier, I would have made a woman spinning or spooling yarn — full length — of them.

To return for a moment to that question of the female heads in the Jacquet genre, not the earlier ones but of the present day. The reaction against them — certainly with a motive — by people who paint heads of girls like our sisters, for instance — I can well understand that there are painters who do such things — Whistler did it well several times — Millais, Boughton — to mention only people by whom I saw something of the sort in the past. I know little by *Fantin-Latour*, but what I saw I thought *very good. Chardinesque*. And that's a lot. For my part, though, I'm not the sort of character who has much chance of getting on a sufficiently intimate footing with girls of that sort that they're willing to pose. Particularly not with my own sisters. And am possibly also prejudiced against women who wear dresses. And my province is more those who wear jackets and skirts.

Though I think what you say about it is true — namely that it's perfectly *possible* to paint them — and it has a *raison d'être* as a reaction against the present-day Jacquets and Van Beers &c.

Just this, though — Chardin (let's sum up the aim of the reaction in his name, *Fantin-Latour*, at least, would approve), Chardin was a Frenchman and painted *French women*. And in my view, *respectable Dutch* women like our sisters really do extraordinarily often lack the charm that the French frequently have.

Consequently, the so-called respectable element among *Dutch* women isn't really so very attractive — to paint or to think about. But certain common servant girls, on the other hand, are very Chardinesque.

At present I'm painting not just as long as there's light, but even in the evening by lamplight in the cottages, if I can somehow make things out on my palette, in order to capture if possible something of the singular effects of lighting at night, for instance with a large shadow cast on the wall.

I've certainly not seen anything in the last few years as fine as those woodcutters by *Lhermitte*.

How his little figures in that composition are felt and wanted.

Thanks again for it.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

The Chardinesque is, it seems to me, a singular expression of *simplicity* and of *goodness* — both *through and through*, and I find it a little hard to believe that one would find it in our sisters, say, either one of them. But if Wil were a Frenchwoman rather than a minister's daughter, she *could* have it. But *as good as always* sails to the opposite point of the compass.

## **Telegram, sent from Eindhoven, Friday, 27 March 1885**

To Theo van Gogh, c/o 19 boulevard Montmartre, Paris (letter 487)

Our father fatal stroke, come, but it is over.  
Van Gogh

## **Nuenen, Monday, 6 April 1885**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 490)

My dear Theo,

I'm still very much under the impression of what has just happened — I just kept painting these two Sundays.

Herewith another scratch of a man's head and one of a still life with honesty in the same style as the one you took with you. [[sketch A](#)] It's rather larger, though — and the objects in the foreground are a tobacco pouch and a pipe of Pa's. If you think you'd like it, of course you're right welcome to have it.



490A. *Honesty in a vase*

Ma looks well, and writing many letters provides some distraction for the time being. But, of course, still very sad. Cor has just gone back to Helmond.

I don't know whether you still remember that in January, when the snow was lying on the fields and the sun rose red in the mist, I wrote to you that I'd almost never started a year in a gloomier mood. It's certain that there'll be a whole lot more trouble for all of us.

Of course you'll understand that it's not for my convenience that I'll go and live in the studio.

It will make things even more difficult for me.

But I'm convinced that it's to their advantage for me to leave, particularly in view of Ma's intention to take in a lodger this summer, if possible, who wanted to be in the country for his health — or should this not come about, then they're still freer with regard to guests &c.

However, I still very much regret the incident with Anna that decided me in this respect. What she said to you changed nothing of what she reproached me for, and however absurd those reproaches were and her unfounded presumptions about things that are still in the future — she hasn't told me she takes them back. Well — you understand how I simply shrug my shoulders at such things — and anyway, I increasingly let people think of me just exactly what they will, and say and do too, if need be.

But consequently I have no choice — with a beginning like that, one has to take steps to prevent all that sort of thing in the future.

So I'm absolutely decided.

It's likely that Ma, Wil and Cor will go to Leiden next year. Then I'll be the only one of us who's still in Brabant.

And I think it by no means unlikely that I'll stay here for the rest of my life, too. After all, I desire nothing other than to live deep in the country and to paint peasant life.

I feel that I can create a place for myself here, and so I'll quietly keep my hand to my plough and cut my furrow. I believe that you thought differently about it, and that you would perhaps rather see me take another course as regards where I live.

But I sometimes think that you have more idea of what people can do in the city, yet on the other hand I feel more *at home* in the country.

All the same, it will still take me a great deal of effort before I imprint my paintings in people's heads.

Meanwhile, I have no intention whatsoever of allowing myself to be discouraged.

I was thinking again of what I read about Delacroix — 17 of his paintings were rejected; '*dix-sept de refusés*', he himself told his friends straight out.

I was thinking today that they really were almighty brave fellows, those pioneers.

But the battle has to be continued even now, and for my part I also want to fight for as much and as little as I'm worth. And so — Theo, I hope that we can continue on both sides what we've now started again. Awaiting or, rather, while I toil away on more important compositions, I'm sending you the studies as they come straight from the cottages. Of course people will say they're not finished or they're ugly &c. &c., but — in my view — *show them anyway*. For my part, I have a firm belief that there are a few people who, ending up in and tied to the city, retain indelible impressions of the country, and continue to feel homesick for the fields and the peasants all their lives.

Art lovers like this are sometimes struck by sincerity, and not put off by what deters others.

I know how I used to walk round the city for hours, looking in the shop windows, to see some little view of the country somewhere, no matter what.

We're now at the beginning of letting people see; I believe absolutely and utterly that little by little we'll find a few people for it. Circumstances compel us, and gradually we'll also be able to show better things.

Now, at this moment, I'm very much preoccupied with paying off my paint bill, and moreover I need canvas, paint, brushes.

Since you've had to do exceptional things for the people at home because of Pa's death, I've come up with the following idea.

Suppose that you don't feel you're in a position to give me the extra I received in spring and summer in other years, and which, by the way, I can't do without.

Wouldn't you think it fair in that case if, when settling affairs, I were to reserve for myself a sum of, say, 200 francs of my share, which I'll otherwise right willingly let the youngsters have? And would be able to let them have altogether if you can help me.

By the way, I don't see it as *my* letting them have my share — but rather that it's because of you that they can keep my portion.

If I go to live in the studio, I'll inevitably have to have a cupboard built, for instance, because at present I have nowhere at all to store things, and I'll also improve the light.

To me, moving would be as bad as a fire — and anyway I think that we'll stay on top of things with perseverance and effort.

I think I'll start painting in watercolour regularly in the evenings — as soon as I'm living in the studio — it can't really be done in the living room



here at home. Until then, I'll go on working from the model in the evenings too.

As to Anna — you mustn't think that I'll continue to take something like that amiss or hold a grudge about it — but only, it's a shame that they think to do Ma a service with something like that — that's a shame — and that's stupid and unwise. As long as Ma and Wil are here, nothing unpleasant will happen between them and me; I don't think so. Only it's certain that Ma simply cannot comprehend that painting is *a faith* and that it brings with it *the duty* to pay no heed to public opinion — and that in it one conquers by *perseverance* and not by *giving in*. And — 'I can't give you faith' is also the case between Her Hon. and me — just as it was and remained with Pa too.

Anyway — I plan to make a start this week on that thing with the peasants around a dish of potatoes in the evening, or — perhaps I'll make daylight of it, or both, or — 'neither one' — you'll say. But should it succeed or should it fail, I'm going to start on the studies for the different figures. Regards, with a handshake.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

## **Nuenen, Thursday, 9 April 1885**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 492)

My dear Theo,

It has surprised me a little not to have received even a single word from you. You'll say you've been too busy to think about it — and I can very well understand that.

It's already late — but I wanted to tell you once more that I wholeheartedly hope that from now on the correspondence will again become livelier than it has been recently.

Herewith two scratches after a couple of studies that I made, while at the same time I'm working on those peasants around a dish of potatoes again.

I've just come home from there — and have worked on it further by lamplight — although this time I started it in daylight. [[sketch A](#)] See, this is

what the composition has now become. I've painted it on a fairly large canvas, and as the sketch is now, I believe there's life in it.

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Waarde Theo,

Het heeft my eenigzins verwonderd nog  
met eens een woordje van u ontvangen te hebben.  
Gezult zeggen ge hadt het nu te druk daaraan  
te denken - en dat kan ik dan ook wel  
begrypen -

Het is reeds laat - maar ik wilde u nog eens zeggen  
dat ik zeer hartelyk hoop dat voortaan de  
correspondentie weer wat levendiger zal worden  
dan ze den laatste tyd wel was -

Merly gaen twee krobbels naar een  
paar studies die ik maakte terwyl ik tevens  
 bezig ben op nieuw aan die boeren om  
een school aardappels.

Ik kom er daarnet van thuis - en heb by het  
lamplicht nog gewerkt er aan - afschaaf  
ik het by dag defmaale heb aangezet.



Zie hier hoe de compositie nu geworden is  
Ik heb het op een vrij groot doek geschilderd ~~en het is~~  
~~dat het~~ en nu de Schets nu is zal gelooft er veel  
leren in -

But I know for certain that C.M., for instance, would speak of — badly drawn &c.

Do you know what can definitely be said to counter that? That the beautiful effects of the light in nature require one to work very fast. Now I know very well that the great masters were able both to finish *and* to maintain the vitality, particularly in the period of their mature experience.

But that's something I certainly won't be able to do like that for the time being.

At the point where I now am, though, I see a chance of giving a felt impression of what I see.

Not always literally exactly — rather never exactly — for one sees nature through one's own temperament.

What I'd like to advise now is the following: don't let the time slip by — let me work as much as is in any way possible — and keep all the studies from now on yourself. I'd rather not sign any of them yet, though, because I wouldn't like to have them circulating like paintings, so that one would have to buy them back later should one make something of a name.

But it's good that you're showing them, because you'll see that some day we'll find someone who wants to do what I'm suggesting to you, that is, make a collection of studies.

I mean to go out regularly in the mornings and just tackle whatever I see the people doing in the fields or at home. As I do now anyway.

You're looking for new ideas for the art trade; the idea of being *fair* to the art lovers isn't new, but it's one that *never grows old*. So, too, giving security — on a purchase. And I ask you, isn't an art lover better off when he has, say, 20 very diverse sketches by a painter for the same price that he would reasonably have to pay for one painting that was finished so that it could be put into circulation as a saleable commodity? If I were in your position, because after all you know a lot of young painters who haven't yet made a name, I'd just try once to put *painted studies* on the market proper — not as paintings, but mounted somehow or other, on gilt Bristol, say, or black or dark red.

But I spoke there about giving *security*.

Not *all* painters make a lot of studies — but many do, and the young ones in particular have to do it as much as possible, don't they? Anyone who owns a painter's studies can be as good as certain (at least so it seems to me)

that there's a bond between the painter and him that can't easily be broken just on a whim.

There are people, aren't there, who support painters during the time when they aren't yet earning — very well.

But how often does it happen that such a thing ends badly — unpleasantly for both parties? On the one hand because the patron is dissatisfied about money that's wholly wasted, or at least seems to be. On the other hand because the painter feels entitled to ask for more trust, more patience and interest than people are prepared to give. But in most cases it's carelessness on both sides that gives rise to the misunderstandings. I hope that this won't be the case between us. And I hope that gradually my studies will give you some new courage. Neither you nor I are contemporaries of that generation that Gigoux rightly calls 'the valiant ones' in that book of yours that I read.

But maintaining the enthusiasm of *those days* at *this* time is nonetheless advisable, it seems to me, because it's often true that fortune favours the bold, and be this as it may — about fortune or 'la joie (?) de vivre', that is — one must work and be bold if one really wants to live. And I say, let's paint a lot and be productive, and BE OURSELVES WITH FAULTS AND QUALITIES — I say us — because the money from you that I know causes you trouble enough to provide for me, gives you the right, if anything good happens in my work, to consider half of it as your own creation.

Try to talk to someone at Le Chat Noir and ask them whether they want a scratch of those potato eaters and, if so, what size, because it makes no difference to me.

Regards, with a handshake.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

[[sketches B–C](#)]





492B. *Man and woman planting potatoes*





## Nuenen, Thursday, 30 April 1885

To Theo van Gogh (letter 497)

My dear Theo,

Sincere wishes for your good health and serenity on your birthday. I would like to have sent you the painting of the potato eaters for this day, but although it's coming along well, it's not quite finished yet.

Although I'll have painted the actual painting in a relatively short time, and largely from memory, it's taken a whole winter of painting studies of heads and hands. And as for the few days in which I've painted it now — it's consequently been a formidable fight, but one for which I have great enthusiasm. Although at times I feared that it wouldn't come off. But painting is also 'act and create'.

When the weavers weave those fabrics that I believe they call cheviots, and also the singular Scottish multicoloured tartan fabrics — then they try, as you know, to get singular broken colours and greys in the cheviots — or to get the very brightest colours in balance against one another in the multicoloured tartans so that, rather than the fabric clashing, the *overall effect* of the pattern is harmonious from a distance. A grey that's woven from red, blue, yellow, off-white and black threads, a blue that — is *broken* by a green and an orange, red or yellow thread — are very different from *plain* colours — that is, they *vibrate* more and make whole colours look *harsh*, *whole*, and LIFELESS.

However, it's not always exactly easy for the weaver, or rather the designer of the pattern or the colour combination, to work out his calculation of the number of threads and their direction — nor is it easy to weave brushstrokes together into a harmonious whole. If you saw the first painted studies that I made when I came here to Nuenen — and the present canvas — side by side — I think you'd see that as far as colour is concerned — things have livened up.

I think that the question of the breaking of colours in the relationships of the colours will occupy you too one day. For as an art expert and critic, one must also, it seems to me — *be sure* of one's ground and have certain

*convictions*. At least for one's own pleasure and to *be able to give reasons*, and at the same time one must be able to explain it in a few words to others, who sometimes turn to someone like you for enlightenment when they want to know something more about art.

Now, though, I have something to say about Portier — of course his private opinion isn't at all a matter of indifference to me, and I also appreciate to the utmost that he said that he took back nothing of what he'd said.

Nor does it concern me that it appeared that he hadn't hung these first *studies*.

But — if he also wants me to send a painting destined for him, *then he can only have it on condition that he exhibits it*.

As regards the potato eaters — it's a painting *that looks well in gold*, I'm sure of that. Still — it would do equally well on a wall hung with a paper that had a deep tone of ripe wheat. It *simply mustn't be seen, though*, without this *enclosure* to it.

It does *not* appear to advantage against a *dark* background, and particularly not against a *dull* background. And this is because it's a glimpse into a very grey interior.

In *reality*, it's also in a gilt frame as it were — since the hearth and the light from the fire on the white walls — which now lie *outside* the painting but in real life throw the whole thing backwards — would be closer to the viewer.

Once more, one must *enclose* it by placing something in a deep gold or copper colour around it.

Please bear that in mind if you want to see it as it should be seen. This association with a gold tone at the same time brings brightness to *areas where you wouldn't expect it* and takes away the *marbled* look that it gets if one unfortunately places it against a dull or black background. The shadows are painted with blue, and the gold colour works with that.

Yesterday I took it to an acquaintance of mine in Eindhoven, who is painting. In 3 days or so, I'll go over there and lift it with a little white of egg and finish off a few details. This man, who is himself doing his very best to learn to paint and is himself also trying to find a good colour palette, was extremely taken with it. He'd already seen the study from which I made the lithograph, and said that he hadn't thought that I could have raised the level of both the colour and the drawing so much higher. Since he also paints from

models, he also knows very well what a peasant's head or fist entails, and as to the hands, he said that he now had a very different concept of how to do them himself.

You see, I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these folk, who are eating their potatoes by the light of their little lamp, have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of MANUAL LABOUR and — that they have thus honestly *earned* their food. I wanted it to give the idea of a wholly different way of life from ours — civilized people. So I certainly don't want everyone just to admire it or approve of it without knowing why.

I've had the threads of this fabric in my hands the whole winter long, and searched for the definitive pattern — and if it's now a fabric that has a rough and coarse look, nevertheless the threads were chosen with care and in accordance with certain rules. And it might well prove to be a REAL PEASANT PAINTING. *I know that it is.* But anyone who would rather see insipidly pretty peasants can go ahead. For my part, I'm convinced that in the long run it produces better results to paint them in their coarseness than to introduce conventional sweetness.

A peasant girl is more beautiful than a lady — to my mind — in her dusty and patched blue skirt and jacket, which have acquired the most delicate nuances from weather, wind and sun. But — if she puts — a lady's costume on, then the genuineness is lost. A peasant in his suit of fustian in the fields is finer than when he goes to church on Sundays in a sort of gentleman's coat.

And likewise, one would be wrong, to my mind, to give a peasant painting a certain conventional smoothness. If a peasant painting smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam — fine — that's not unhealthy — if a stable smells of manure — very well, that's what a stable's for — if the field has an odour of ripe wheat or potatoes or — of guano and manure — that's really healthy — particularly for city folk. *They get something useful* out of paintings like this. But a peasant painting mustn't become perfumed. I'm curious as to whether you'll find anything in it that you like — I hope so. I'm glad that now, just as Mr Portier has said he wants to handle my work, I for my part have something more important than the studies alone. As to Durand-Ruel — although he didn't think the drawings worthwhile, show him this painting. He may think it ugly — very well — but let him see it anyway — so that they may see that we're putting energy into our



endeavours. However, you'll hear — 'WHAT A DAUB!'; be prepared for that as I'm prepared myself. But nonetheless go on giving something *genuine* and *honest*.

Painting peasant life is a serious thing, and I for one would blame myself if I didn't try to make paintings such that they give people who think seriously about art and about life serious things to think about. Millet, Degroux, so many others, have set examples of *character*, of taking no notice of the reproaches of — nasty, crude, muddy, stinking &c. &c., that it would be a disgrace if one were even to have misgivings.

No — one must paint the peasants as if one were one of them, as feeling, thinking as they do themselves.

As not being able to be other than one is.

I so often think that the peasants are a world in themselves, so much better in many respects than the civilized world.

Not in all respects, because what do they know of art and many other things?

I do still have a few smaller studies — you can imagine, though, that I've been kept so busy with the larger one that I've been able to do little else besides that.

As soon as the whole thing is finished and dry, I'll just send the canvas to you in a small crate, and then put a few smaller ones in with it. I think it's best not to delay sending it for too long, which is why I'll send it. Then the second lithograph of it will probably have to be abandoned. But still — I understand that Mr Portier, for instance, must be confirmed in what he said, so that we can count on him as a friend for ever. I sincerely hope this will succeed.

I've been so absorbed in the painting that I've literally almost forgotten my move, which nonetheless also has to be done. It won't reduce my concerns, but the lives of all painters in that genre are so full of them that I wouldn't want to have things any easier than they had them. And since, despite everything, they still got their paintings done, the material difficulties will also *hinder* but not *destroy* or *weaken* me. Anyway.

I believe that the potato eaters will come off — the last days are always hazardous for a painting, as you know, because one can't touch it with a large brush when it isn't completely dry without a great risk of spoiling it. And the changes have to be made very coolly and calmly with a small brush. This is why I simply took it away and said to my friend that he just had to

make sure that I didn't spoil it in that way, and that I'd come do those small things at his place. You'll see that it has originality. Regards — I'm sorry it wasn't ready for today — again wishing you health and serenity, believe me, with a handshake

Yours truly,  
Vincent

Today I'll work on a few smaller studies, which will then go at the same time. Did you ever send that Salon issue?

## **Nuenen, on or about Monday, 13 July 1885**

To Anthon van Rappard (letter 514)

My dear friend Rappard,

All that has passed means that when I come to write to you it's more in order to be clear than because I do it for my pleasure. As to my having returned your last letter to you forthwith, there were two reasons for it, each in its own right, to my mind, providing a motive. Firstly — suppose that your comments on the lithograph I sent you were correct, suppose I had nothing to say against them — even then, you wouldn't have been justified in condemning my work in such an insulting manner, or rather in ignoring it as you did.

And secondly — whereas you have had more friendship than you have given, not just from me but from my family too, you certainly cannot *claim* that on an occasion such as my father's death we were *obliged* to send something other than a printed notice.

Particularly not *me*, since before that time you hadn't replied to a letter from me. Particularly not *me*, since on the occasion of my father's death you did send an expression of sympathy in a letter addressed to my mother — but such a one that when it arrived there was comment at home about what reason there might be for not writing to me then — which I didn't want, however, nor do I.

You know — I haven't been on the best of terms with them at home for years. In the first few days after my father died, I *had* to correspond with the

immediate family. But otherwise, as soon as family arrived, I withdrew from it all completely. And regarding any omissions, not me but the family. And I have to tell you that in so far as it goes, you're an exception, that I asked them at home if they'd sent you word and it appeared that it had been forgotten. Much more than enough about that.

The reason I'm writing to you again is in no way to respond to your comment in that regard. Nor to repeat what I said about your remarks about painting. You've been able to re-read your own letter. If you still believe that was justified, if you still really think that 'if you put your mind to it, you can deuced well express yourself correctly' — well — then it's best simply to leave you to your delusions.

To get to the point — the reason why I'm writing to you is simply that — although it was you who insulted me in the first place, not I you — I've known you too long for me to consider this a reason to break off all acquaintance. What I have to say to you is as a painter to a painter and — so long as you and I paint — it will remain so — whether we know each other, whether we don't. There was mention of *Millet*.

Very well — I'll answer you, my dear friend.

You wrote, 'you dare to invoke Millet and Breton'.

My reply to that is that I seriously invite you to consider — simply *not* to fight with me. For my part — I go my own way — you see — but I don't seek a quarrel with anyone — *not* with you now either. I'd also let you say anything that you wanted — if you had any more such expressions — and it would just be like water off a duck's back. So much for the present, though. That I don't care about the form of the figure, which you've said before — it's beneath me to take any notice of it and — old chap — it's beneath you to say something so unfounded. You've known me for years now — have you ever seen me do anything other than work from the model and resign myself to the sometimes great expense of it, even though I'm poor enough as it is?

What you didn't write in your last, but did repeatedly and ad nauseam in previous letters, and was the reason for the letter to which you didn't reply, is about '*technique*'. What I replied to you then and reply once more is — the conventional meaning that people increasingly give to the word technique, and the actual meaning, *knowledge*. Well then. Meissonier himself says,

*'the knowledge — nobody has it'.*



Well, 'the knowledge' isn't the same as 'knowledge', that first of all, and that you won't deny. But even that still isn't it.

Take Haverman, for instance; people — you too — say of him that he has so much *technique*. But not only Haverman, how many others — have something that's equivalent to the sort of knowledge that H. has of art — among the French painters — Jacquet, say, and he's *better*.

My assertion is simply this — that drawing a figure academically correctly — that an even, reasoned brushstroke have little — at least less than is generally thought — to do with the needs — the urgent needs — of the present day in the field of painting.

If, instead of saying H. has a lot of 'technique', you were to say H. has a lot of 'craftsmanship', I would have agreed with you for once. You will perhaps understand what I mean when I say that when Haverman sits in front of the head of a beautiful girl/woman, he'll make it more beautiful than almost anyone, but put him in front of a peasant — and — he won't even make a start on it. His art — as far as I know — proves chiefly applicable to subjects which aren't the ones that are needed — is above all applicable to subjects that are pretty much completely and utterly opposite to Millet or Lhermitte — and sooner run parallel to Cabanel — who for all his what I call — craftsmanship — has said little that lasted — or contributed to progress. And — this I beg of you — don't *confuse* this with the way a Millet or Lhermitte paints.

What I said and still say — the word — technique — is all too often used in a conventional sense — and — it's all too often not used in good faith. People praise the *technique* of all those Italians and Spaniards, and they're fellows who are more conventional, have more sheer routine — than anyone else. And with such as Haverman, I fear, 'craftsmanship' so soon becomes — 'routine'. And then — what's it worth then?

What I want to ask now — what's the real reason that you've broken with me —?

The reason I'm writing to you again is just out of love for Millet, for Breton and for *everyone* who paints the *peasants* and the *people*, among whom I count you. I don't say it because I got a lot from you as a friend — my dear friend — because — I got precious little from you — and don't take it amiss of me for saying this to you straight out for the first and last time — I know of no drier friendship than yours. But — firstly *that's* not why I'm doing it — secondly, that might have improved too — but having created my

own opportunities to find models &c., I'm not so petty as to keep it quiet. On the contrary — were any painter, no matter who, to come to this district, I would be glad both to invite him home and to show him the way. Precisely because it's not always easy to find models who are willing to pose — and having a pied-à-terre somewhere isn't a matter of indifference to everyone.

And this is why I say to you that, if you want to paint here, you mustn't be embarrassed because we had a disagreement. And — although I'm living on my own in my studio now — you can even stay too.

It may be, though, that — superciliously — you'll say that this is of no consequence to you. Well, that's all right. I'm so accustomed to insults that they really are so like water off a duck's back — that — someone like you — probably finds it hard to understand just how cold a letter like yours, say, leaves me. And being indifferent to it — I have no more resentment than a post. But I do have — enough clarity and serenity to reply as I do now.

If you want to break with me — very well.

If you want to go on painting here — you don't have to take any notice of this little bit of bickering in our correspondence.

What you did the last time you were here — had and has my full sympathy — and — my dear friend Rappard — it's because you worked so damned well that last time, and I think to myself that you might perhaps want things here to remain as they were, that I'm writing to you.

Make up your own mind — I say frankly — from one point of view — in spite of all my appreciation of your painting — I have some concerns about whether you'll be able to keep it up like this *later* — I sometimes fear that, because of the influences to which you cannot but be exposed given your social position and standing, you may not remain as good in the long run as you are at the moment — just as a painter in your painting — I don't concern myself with the rest.

So I say to you, as a painter to a painter, that if you want to look for paintings here, *it will stay just the same as before*. You can come here and, although I live on my own, stay just the same as before. You see — I thought that perhaps you had got and could get something out of it, and I just wanted to tell you this. If you can get on as well elsewhere — well then — I'll have no reason to grieve about it, and then, adieu.

You've told me nothing about *your* work, so I likewise say nothing about *mine*.

Believe me — don't argue with me about Millet — Millet is someone I won't argue about, although I don't refuse to talk about him.

Regards.

Vincent

## **Nuenen, on or about Wednesday, 2 September 1885**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 531)

My dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and 150 francs enclosed. I also received the two new Lhermites today. He's a master of the figure. He's able to do what he likes with it — conceiving the whole neither from the colour nor from the local tone, but rather proceeding from the light — as Rembrandt did — there's something astonishingly masterly in everything he does — in modelling, above all things, he utterly satisfies the demands of honesty.

A great deal is said about — Poussin. Bracquemond talks about him, too. The French call Poussin their greatest ever painter among the old masters. Well it's certain that what's said about Poussin, whom I know so very little about, I find in Lhermitte and in Millet. But with this distinction, that it seems to me Poussin is the original grain, the others are the full ear. For my part, then, I rate today's *superior*.

This last fortnight I've had a great deal of trouble with the reverend gentlemen of the priesthood, who gave me to understand — of course with the best of intentions and, no less than others, believing that it was their duty to interfere — who gave me to understand that I shouldn't be too familiar with people beneath my station — who, having spoken to me in those terms, spoke in a very different tone to the 'people of lower station', that's to say with threats that they mustn't allow themselves to be painted. This time I simply went straight to the burgomaster and told him exactly what had happened, and pointed out that this was none of the priests' business and that they should stick to their own province of more abstract things. In any event, I'm not encountering any more opposition for the time being, and I think it quite possible that that's how it will remain. A girl I'd often painted was

having a child and they thought it was mine, although it wasn't me. However, knowing the facts of the matter from the girl herself and it being a case in which a member of the priest's congregation in Nuenen had behaved extremely badly, they can't get their teeth into me, at least not this time. But you see that it isn't easy to paint people at home and draw them as they go about their business. Anyway — they won't easily win in this case, and this winter I do hope to keep the very same models, who are of the old Brabant stock through and through.

Even so, I have a few more new drawings.

But now, in the last few days, I could not get anyone in the fields. Fortunately for me, the priest isn't yet, but is nonetheless beginning to become, quite unpopular. It's a bad business, though, and if it were to continue I'd probably move. You'll ask what's the point of being a disagreeable person — sometimes you have to be. If I'd discussed it meekly they'd have ground me down without mercy. And when they hinder me in my work, sometimes the only way I know is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The priest went so far as to *promise* the people money if they didn't allow themselves to be painted — however, the people replied very pertly that they'd rather earn it from me than go cap in hand to him. But you see, they only do it for the sake of earning money and I don't get *anything* done for *nothing* around here.

You ask me whether Rappard has ever sold anything. I know he's flusher at present than before, that for a long time, for instance, he had a nude model day after day, that for the purposes of a painting of a brickworks he's now rented a small house actually on the spot and altered it so that he had light from above — I know that he's been on another trip through Drenthe and that he's also going to Terschelling. That all of this is pretty expensive, and the money for it has to come from *somewhere*. That although he may have money of his own, he must be earning as well, because otherwise he couldn't do what he's doing. It may be that his family is buying or friends, that's possible, but at any rate somebody must be.

But this evening I'm much too occupied with Lhermitte's drawings to go on writing any more about other things.

When I think about Millet or about Lhermitte — then — I find modern art as great — as Michelangelo and Rembrandt — the old infinite, the new infinite too — the old *genius*, the new *genius*. Perhaps someone like

Chenavard doesn't see it like this — but for my part I'm convinced — that in this regard one can believe in the present.

The fact that I have a definite belief as regards art also means that I know what I want to get in my own work, and that I'll try to get it even if I go under in the attempt. Regards.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

## **Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 10 October 1885**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 534)

My dear Theo,

I've been to Amsterdam this week — I hardly had time to see anything but the museum.

I was there 3 days; went Tuesday, back Thursday. Result is that I'm *very glad* I went, whatever the cost, and that I don't propose going for so long again without seeing paintings.

I'd already put it off and put it off, that and so much else, because of the cost. But it's much better that I can no longer imagine that this is the thing to do. I get too much out of it — for my work, and when I look at the old paintings, which I can decipher as regards technique very differently from before — then perhaps I have precious little need for conversation anyway.

I don't know whether you remember that to the left of the Night watch, in other words as a pendant to the Syndics, there's a painting — it was unknown to me until now — by *Frans Hals* and *P. Codde*, 20 or so officers full length. Have you noticed it??? In itself, that painting alone makes the trip to Amsterdam well worth while, especially for a colourist. There's a figure in it, the figure of the standard-bearer in the extreme left corner, right up against the frame. That figure is in grey from top to toe, let's call it pearl grey, — of a singular neutral tone — probably obtained with orange and blue mixed so that they neutralize each other — by varying this basic colour in itself — by making it a little lighter here, a little darker there, the whole figure is as it were painted with one and the same grey. But the leather shoes are a different material from the leggings, which are different from the folds

of the breeches, which are different from the doublet — expressing different materials, very different in colour one from another, still all one family of grey — but wait!

Into that grey he now introduces blue and orange — and some white.

The doublet has satin ribbons of a divine soft blue. Sash and flag orange — a white collar.

*Orange, white, blue*, as the national colours were then. Orange and blue next to each other, that most glorious spectrum — on a ground of grey judiciously mixed, precisely by uniting just those two, let me call them poles of electricity (in terms of colour, though) so that they obliterate each other, a white against that grey. Further carried through in that painting — other orange spectrums against a different blue, further the most glorious blacks against the most glorious whites — the heads — some twenty — sparkling with spirit and life, and how they're done! and what colour! the superb appearance of all those fellows, full length. But that orange, white, blue chap in the left corner — — ..... I've seldom seen a more divinely beautiful figure — — it's something marvellous.

Delacroix would have adored it — just adored it to the utmost.

I stood there literally rooted to the spot. Now you know the singer, that laughing chap — bust in a greenish black with carmine.

Carmine in the flesh colour, too.

You know the bust of the man in yellow — *dull lemon* — whose face, because of the opposition of tones, is a daring and masterly bronze, like wine-red (violet?).

Bürger wrote about Rembrandt's Jewish bride just as he wrote about Vermeer of Delft, just as he wrote about Millet's sower, just as he wrote about Frans Hals — dedicating himself and surpassing himself. The Syndics is perfect — the finest Rembrandt — but that Jewish bride — not reckoned so much — what an intimate, what an infinitely sympathetic painting, painted — with a glowing hand. You see, in The syndics Rembrandt is true to life, although *even there* he still goes into the higher — into the very highest — infinite. But yet — Rembrandt could do something else — when he didn't have to be true in the *literal* sense, as he did in a portrait — when he could — *make poetry* — be a *poet*, that's to say *Creator*. That's what he is in the Jewish bride. Oh how Delacroix would have understood that very painting! What a noble sentiment, fathomlessly deep. One must have died many times to paint like this — is certainly applicable here. Still — one can

speak about the paintings by Frans Hals, he always remains — on *earth*. Rembrandt goes so deep into the mysterious that he says things for which there are no words in any language. It is with justice that they call Rembrandt — *magician* — that's no easy occupation.

I've packed up various still lifes which you'll receive next week, with two souvenirs of Amsterdam that I snatched in haste and also a couple of drawings. Will also send you before long a book by De Goncourt — Chérie. De Goncourt is always good, and the way he works so conscientious, and so much toil goes into it.

I saw two paintings by Israëls in Amsterdam, that is the Zandvoort fisherman and — one of his very latest, an old woman, hunched up like a bundle of rags, by a bedstead in which her husband's corpse is lying. I thought them both masterly. Let people prattle on about technique as they will, with hollow, hypocritical, Pharisee words — the true painters — allow themselves to be guided by that conscience that's called sentiment; their soul, their brains aren't led by the brush, but the brush is led by their brains. Moreover it's the canvas that's afraid of a true painter, and not the painter who's afraid of the canvas.

In Amsterdam I saw other present-day paintings, Witkamp and others. Witkamp's certainly the best, reminds me of Jules Breton; others I have in mind but won't name, who — fence — with what *they* call technique, for my part I found WEAK *precisely in the technical sense*. You know — all those cold, grey tones that they think are distinguished and that are flat and bloody boringly, childishly mixed. Nowadays, for the convenience of painters who work in what they think is a distinguished, light spectrum, they deliberately manufacture colours consisting of — the ordinary ones mixed with pure white. Bah!

Listen — the *technique*, the mixing of colour, the modelling of the Zandvoort fisherman, for instance, is to my mind Delacroix-like and superb, and the present-day cold, flat greys — don't mean much in terms of technique, become *paint*, and Israëls is beyond the paint. To be sure — I'm not talking about Jaap Maris, Willem Maris, Mauve, Neuhuys, who each worked in his singular spectrum in the right manner — Blommers &c. But the school of the masters, their followers, Theo — I think they're getting threadbare.

Went to the Fodor too.



Decamps's shepherd really is a masterpiece — do you remember the Meissonier — a sketch — of a deathbed? The Diaz? Well, I always like to see Bosboom, Waldorp, Nuijen, Rochussen, the *original* fellows of that period 40 years back. Rochussen has a vitality like Gavarni's.

The still lifes I'm sending you are studies for colour. I'm going to do some more — don't think this is pointless. They'll sink in after a while, but in a year, say, they'll be better than now once they're dry right through and are given a thorough varnishing. If you use drawing pins to hang a large number of my studies on a wall in your room, both the earlier ones and these — just jumbled together — you'll see, I believe, that there's a link between these studies, that the colours work well alongside one another.

Speaking — of — too black — I'm very glad, all the more so as I see more of the paintings in cold, childish spectrums — that they think my studies are too black.

Look at the Zandvoort fisherman, and what is it painted with? Is it painted with red, with blue, with yellow, with black and some off-white, with brown (all well mixed and broken) or not? When Israëls says that one mustn't be black, he certainly never means what they're making of it now; he means that one gives colour to the shadows, but of course that really doesn't rule out a single spectrum, however low, not that of the blacks and browns and deep blues.

But what's the point of thinking about it — it's better to think about Rembrandt, about Frans Hals, about Israëls, than about that respectable impotence.

I'm writing at some length — even if you perhaps don't believe what I say about the colours, and even if you think me pessimistic when I say that much of what they call subtle grey is very ugly grey, even if you think me pessimistic or worse still when I also condemn the smooth finishing of faces, hands, eyes, since all the great masters worked differently — perhaps, little by little, your own *study* of art, which you have happily begun again properly, will change you too. Now I have a favour to ask you. That friend of mine in Eindhoven, who went with me to Amsterdam, bought Bürger, *Musées de la Hollande, Van der Hoop et Rotterdam* at C.M.'s, but C.M. didn't have *the first volume, Musées de la Haye et d'Amsterdam*. We must have that one though. It's out of print, but you'll be able to dig one up somewhere, and he's even prepared to give 10 francs for it if need be, although preferably cheaper, of course. I'll send you what it costs you

straightaway, since it's for him, and he charged me with this on that condition. So will you do your best to get it? If you do find it, read it through again yourself first — because it's so good.

I didn't go into C.M.'s with him.

The two little panels I painted in Amsterdam were done in a tearing hurry, one of them, mark you, in the station waiting room when I was a bit early for the train, the other one in the morning, before I went to the museum at about 10 o'clock. Even so, I'm sending them to you, in the manner of tiles on which one has dashed something off with a few strokes.

As regards the end of this month — old chap, I'm literally cleaned out — what's to be done? Couldn't you send an extra twenty francs or something? I have to pay for paint again next month, 1 Nov. 25 guilders rent.

As regards connections for my work — I did speak to someone, and if I ever go again I'll take work with me. There's a general laxness that MAKES it EASY ENOUGH as regards finding a chance to exhibit.

LET'S PAINT A VERY GREAT DEAL. That's the message if we want to succeed, work *a lot* precisely because it's slack — then one day, rather than finding all ports closed to us — we may be able to lash a broom to the mast. Regards.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

# Becoming a Modern Artist

## Antwerp and Paris, November 1885–October 1887

Van Gogh made the short trip to Antwerp on 24 November 1885. The bustling, historic harbour city appealed to him immediately. His hunger for art and new ideas, stirred by his visit to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam the previous month, drove him to visit every place in the city where the work of old and contemporary artists could be seen: the museums, the churches with their religious paintings by great masters, the viewing days at auction houses, and even an art lottery. He commented, more frequently than before, on the use of colour and technique in the paintings he saw. He looked at Rubens differently now, judging not so much his subject matter and convincing rendering of emotions as his effective use of colour. Van Gogh was now looking at things through the eyes of a painter. The small number of painted portraits that survive from this period – executed in looser brushwork and brighter colours than his Nuenen work – show how eager he was to put his new insights into practice.

Van Gogh made contact with some art dealers, but realized that the few paintings that had been shipped with his belongings were unlikely to sell. His chances of success were minimal, he now understood, unless he started producing town views and portraits. It was not easy to find affordable models, however. Occasionally he tried to persuade a prostitute or other folk type to pose for him, but the cost of painters' materials and hiring models were 'ruining' him (547).

In January 1886 Van Gogh showed some of his recent work to the teachers at the art academy and was admitted for a course of study. There he could paint from models and, in the evening, draw from plaster casts of antique statues. At life-drawing classes which met late in the evening, his acquaintance with other students allowed him to sharpen his mind somewhat, but did not give him much satisfaction. In his eyes, most of them had been completely misled by their teachers, who wrongly focused on technique and disapproved of personal expression. At the same time, he was disappointed at the lack of fellowship and verve in the world of artists and art dealers. He actually found the dull artistic climate quite depressing. It

strengthened his conviction that solidarity and collaboration were necessary to bring about a 'renewal' (549).



Vincent van Gogh (seen from behind) and Emile Bernard on the banks of the Seine at Asnières, c. 1886

In the meantime Vincent's health had deteriorated to an alarming degree. Acting on a doctor's advice, he finally took some rest. He was treated for venereal disease and also needed a lot of dental work, all of which cost a great deal of money. Theo, who often opposed Vincent's uncontrolled spending on materials and models, immediately sent extra money whenever he thought his brother's health was at stake.

At the end of January Van Gogh finished his courses at the academy and took stock of the situation: 'my ideas have changed and been refreshed, and that was actually the goal I had in mind in coming here' (562). No progress had been made, though, with regard to the 'friction of ideas' (555) that he had sought among his peers and the hoped-for sale of his work.

In February Vincent pressed Theo to let him come to Paris – not in June or July, when Theo's lease was due to expire and he would be free to look for a more spacious apartment for the two of them, but immediately. Vincent wanted to spend a year honing his skills as a draughtsman. To this end, he had his eye on Fernand Cormon's studio – popular with foreign artists, and known to be less rigid than more traditional studios – and he wanted to paint copies in the Louvre and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Theo tried to persuade him to return to Nuenen until the summer, but Vincent, leaving behind not just his possessions but also his debts, set out in late February for the capital of France, the capital of the artistic world.

Vincent arrived in Paris without prior warning at the end of February 1886. It had been ten years since his last visit to the metropolis. Everything that was progressive in art, literature, theatre and music came together there. It was in Paris that Van Gogh first heard the music of Wagner and saw experimental plays at the cafés and cabarets of Montmartre. Modern novels by such writers as Guy de Maupassant, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Leo Tolstoy sharpened his view of a society that was changing rapidly in the face of industrialization.

Shortly after his arrival Van Gogh enrolled at Cormon's studio on the boulevard de Clichy, where students could work after the model. But Vincent wrote to Horace Mann Livens, an English acquaintance from the art academy in Antwerp, that he 'did not find that as useful as I had expected it to be' ([569](#)); he gave up working there by June.



Theo's apartment in rue Laval, where he unexpectedly had to make room for Vincent, was exchanged in June for a more spacious apartment in rue Lepic in Montmartre, a district that had preserved its small-scale, rural character. Vincent had a small room to use as a studio, but his chaotic lifestyle and way of working left their mark throughout the house. Theo had a prestigious job that brought with it certain social obligations; Vincent's nonconformist behaviour caused him a great deal of embarrassment.

The fact that the brothers were living together meant fewer letters were exchanged. Our knowledge of their time together in Paris comes from eyewitness accounts and from references and descriptions in Vincent's later letters. Artists with whom Vincent came into contact in this period reported that he was easily upset, aired his opinions whether they were called for or not, and always seemed to be looking for an argument. Feelings often ran high between the brothers, and Theo sometimes suggested that it would be better for them to live apart. But despite the difficulties, their fraternal bond always prevailed.

During his first summer in Paris, Van Gogh painted many flower still lifes to increase his understanding of colour theory and to practise modelling with paint. His brushwork became looser and his colours brighter under the influence of Impressionism, which was ubiquitous in Paris. He became friendly with the intelligent and ambitious Emile Bernard, who was just eighteen years old, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who was at the beginning of his brief but highly successful career. Van Gogh also became acquainted with Paul Gauguin, who held great promise for the future, and he got to know the Pointillists Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. Moreover, he became very enthusiastic about Japanese prints which he admired for their clarity and elegance, and of which he bought large quantities. In 1887 Van Gogh organized an exhibition of Japanese prints from his collection at the café run by Agostina Segatori, briefly his lover, and another show at a restaurant later that year of paintings by himself and several of his friends.





Emile Bernard and his sister Madeleine, c. 1887

In Paris Van Gogh came to the conclusion that being a ‘modern artist’ meant total immersion in the artistic, social and intellectual life of one’s time. He expanded his repertoire by painting cafés, parks, flower still lifes and self-portraits. It is astonishing to see how quickly Van Gogh, coming from the north with his gaze still fixed on the past, managed to reinvent himself in Paris in little more than a year, becoming an artist who had shed all dogma. The modern Van Gogh was born in Paris, a fact of which he was well aware when he left the city two years later.

## Antwerp, Saturday, 28 November 1885

To Theo van Gogh (letter 545)

Saturday evening

My dear Theo,

Wanted to write to you with a few more impressions of Antwerp. This morning I went for a really good walk in the pouring rain, an expedition with the object of fetching my things from the customs office. The different entrepôts and hangars on the wharves are very fine.

I’ve already walked in all directions around these docks and wharves several times. It’s a strange contrast, particularly when one comes from the sand and the heath and the tranquillity of a country village and hasn’t been in anything but quiet surroundings for a long time. It’s an incomprehensible confusion.

One of De Goncourt’s sayings was ‘*Japonaiserie for ever*’. Well, these docks are one huge *Japonaiserie*, fantastic, singular, strange — at least, one can see them like that.

I’d like to walk with you there to find out whether we look at things the same way.

One could do anything there, townscapes — figures of the most diverse character — the ships as the central subject with water and sky in delicate grey — but above all — *Japonaiseries*.

I mean, the figures there are always in motion, one sees them in the most peculiar settings, everything fantastic, and interesting contrasts keep appearing of their own accord.

A white horse in the mud, in a corner where heaps of merchandise lie covered with a tarpaulin — against the old, black, smoke-stained walls of the warehouse. Quite simple — but a Black and White effect.

Through the window of a very elegant English inn one will look out on the filthiest mud and on a ship where such delightful wares as hides and buffalo horns are being unloaded by monstrous docker types or foreign sailors; by the window, looking at this or at something else, stands a very fair, very delicate English girl. The interior with figure wholly in tone, and for light — the silvery sky above that mud and the buffalo horns, again a series of contrasts that's quite strong. There'll be Flemish sailors with exaggeratedly ruddy faces, with broad shoulders, powerful and robust, and Antwerp through and through, standing eating mussels and drinking beer, and making a great deal of noise and commotion about it. Contrast — there goes a tiny little figure in black, with her small hands pressed against her body, slipping soundlessly along the grey walls. In a frame of jet-black hair, a little oval face, brown? Orange yellow? I don't know.

She raises her eyelids momentarily and looks with a slanting glance out of a pair of jet-black eyes. It's a Chinese girl, mysterious, quiet as a mouse, small, like a bedbug by nature. What a contrast to the group of Flemish mussel eaters.

Another contrast — people passing along a very narrow street between formidably tall houses. Warehouses and stores. But down at street level, alehouses for all nations with the corresponding male and female individuals. Shops selling food, sailors' clothes, colourful and bustling.

This street is long, one keeps seeing authentic scenes, and once in a while there's a commotion, louder than usual, when a quarrel breaks out. For instance, you're walking along, looking around, and suddenly a great cheer goes up and all sorts of shouting. In broad daylight a sailor is being thrown out of a brothel by the girls and pursued by a furious fellow and a string of girls. Of whom he is apparently terrified — at any rate, I saw him scramble over a pile of sacks and disappear through a window into a warehouse. Once one's had enough of this racket — at the end of the berths where the Harwich and Le Havre boats lie — having the city behind one — one sees — in front of one, nothing, absolutely nothing but an infinity of flat, half-flooded pasture, incredibly sad and wet, undulating dry reeds, mud — the river with a single small black boat, water in the foreground grey, sky misty and cold, grey — silent as a desert.

The overall effect of the port or of a dock — sometimes it's more tangled and fantastic than a thorn-hedge, so tangled that one can find no rest for the eye, so that one gets dizzy, is forced by the flickering of colours and lines to look now here and now there, unable to tell one thing from another even after staring at a single spot for a long while.

But if one goes to a place where one has an indistinct piece of land as a foreground — then one gets the most beautiful, quiet lines and those effects that Mols, for instance, often gets. Now one sees a girl who is magnificently healthy and, at least seemingly, very sincere and innocently cheerful, then a countenance so slyly malicious that one is frightened by it as if by a hyena. Not forgetting the faces ravaged by the pox, the colour of boiled shrimp, with little dull grey eyes and no eyebrows, and sparse, greasy, thin hair, colour of pure pig's bristle or slightly yellower — Swedish or Danish types. It would be good to work there — but how and where? Because one could run into trouble there exceedingly quickly. All the same, I did roam around a whole lot of streets and alleys without mishap, even sat and talked very genially with various girls, who evidently took me for a bargee.

I don't consider it impossible that I might be able to come by some good models by painting portraits.

Today I got my things and tools — which I was eagerly awaiting. And so I have my studio in order. If I could come by good models at virtually no expense I wouldn't be afraid of anything. I don't reckon it a bad thing, either, that I haven't any money, as much as it would take to force things by paying.

Perhaps the idea of painting portraits and getting the sitters to pay for them by posing is a safer way. Because in the city it's not like it is with the peasants. Anyway. One thing's certain, Antwerp's a very singular and beautiful place for a painter.

My studio's quite tolerable, mainly because I've pinned a set of Japanese prints on the walls that I find very diverting. You know, those little female figures in gardens or on the shore, horsemen, flowers, gnarled thorn branches.

I've reconciled myself to having left — and hope not to be idle this winter.

Well, it's a relief to me to have a little cubby-hole where I can work in bad weather.

It's pretty obvious that I shan't exactly be living in the lap of luxury these days.

See that you send your letter off on the first, because I've got enough bread in until then, but after that I'd be in a real stew.

My little room isn't bad at all, and it definitely doesn't look dreary.

Now that I have the 3 studies I brought with me here, I'll set about going to the picture dealers, who mostly seem to live in private houses, though, no shop windows on the street.

The park is beautiful, too. I sat there drawing one morning.

Well — I've had no setbacks so far. I'm safe and sound as far as accommodation is concerned, for by forking out a few more francs I've acquired a stove and a lamp. I shan't easily get bored, I assure you. I've also found OCTOBER by Lhermitte, women in a potato field in the evening, magnificent. Not yet November, though. Have you kept up to date with that, by any chance? I've also seen that there's a Figaro Illustré with a fine drawing *by Raffaëlli*.

You know my address is *194 rue des Images*, so please address your letter there, and the second volume of De Goncourt when you've finished it.

Regards.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

It's curious that my painted studies look darker here in the city than in the country — is this because the light isn't as bright anywhere in the city? I don't know — but it might differ more than one would say on the face of it. It struck me, and I could understand that things that are with you also appear darker than I thought they were in the country. Still, the ones I've brought with me now don't look bad all the same — the mill — avenue of autumn trees and still life, and a few small ones.

**Antwerp, between Tuesday, 12 and Saturday, 16  
January 1886**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 552)

My dear Theo,

Last Sunday I saw the two large paintings by Rubens for the first time, and because I'd looked at the ones in the museum repeatedly and at my leisure, these — The descent from the Cross and The elevation of the Cross — were all the more interesting for it. There's an oddity in The elevation of the Cross that struck me right away, and that is — there are no female figures in it. Unless on the side panels of the triptych. It's no better for it in consequence. Let me tell you that I adore The descent from the Cross. NOT, though, because of the depth of emotion that one would find in a Rembrandt or in a painting by Delacroix or in a drawing by Millet.

Nothing moves me *less* than Rubens when it comes to the expression of human sorrow. Let me start by saying, to make it clearer what I mean — that even his most beautiful heads of a weeping Magdalen or Mater Dolorosas always just remind me of the tears of a pretty tart who's caught the clap, say, or some such petty vexation of human life — as such they're masterly, but one needn't look for anything more in them. Rubens excels in the painting of ordinary beautiful women. But he is *not* dramatic in the expression. Compare him with, say, the head by Rembrandt in the La Caze Collection — with the male figure in the Jewish bride — you'll understand what I mean — that, for instance, his 8 or so bombastic fellows performing a feat of strength with a heavy wooden cross in The elevation of the Cross seem *absurd* to me as soon as I look at them from the standpoint of modern analysis of human passions and emotions. That in his expressions, particularly in the men (always excepting actual portraits) Rubens is superficial, hollow, bombastic, yes, altogether conventional and nothing, like — Giulio Romano and even worse fellows of the decadence.

But all the same, I adore it because it is precisely he, Rubens, who seeks to express a mood of gaiety, of serenity, of sorrow, and actually achieves it, through the combination of colours — even if his figures are sometimes hollow etc.

Thus in The elevation of the Cross, even — the pale spot — the body a high, light accent — is dramatic in the context of its contrast with the rest, which has been pitched so low.

The same thing, but to my mind far more beautiful, is the charm of The descent from the Cross, where the pale spot is repeated by the blonde hair, pale faces and necks of the female figures, while the sombre setting is immensely rich because of those various low masses, brought together by the tone, of red, dark green, black, grey, violet.

And Delacroix tried again to get people to believe in the symphonies of the colours. And in vain, one would say, judging by how much almost everyone understands good colour to mean the *correctness* of local colour, the small-minded preciseness — that neither Rembrandt, nor Millet, nor Delacroix, nor whomever you like, not even Manet or Courbet, set as their aim, any more than Rubens or Veronese did.

I've also seen various other Rubens paintings &c. in several churches. And it's very interesting to study Rubens, precisely because he is, or rather seems, so supremely simple in his technique. Does it with so little, and paints — and above all draws, too — with such a swift hand and without any hesitation. But portraits and — heads or figures of women, that's his forte. There he's deep and intimate, too. And how fresh his paintings have remained precisely because of the simplicity of the technique.

Now what else shall I tell you? That I feel increasingly inclined, without rushing, that's to say without rushing nervously — to do all my figure studies over again from the beginning very calmly and coolly. I'd like to get to the point in knowledge of the nude and the structure of the figure where I can work from memory. I'd like to work either with Verlat or at another studio for a while, and for the rest also paint from models for myself as much as possible. At the moment I've left 5 paintings — 2 portraits, 2 landscapes, 1 still life — with Verlat's painting class at the academy. I've just been there again, but each time I haven't found him there. But I'll soon be able to let you know how that turns out. And I hope to arrange it so that I can paint from the model at the academy all day, which would make it easier for me, since the models are so awfully expensive that I can't keep it up.

And I must find some way of getting help in that regard.

In any event, I think that I'll stay in Antwerp itself for a while, instead of going back to the country. It would be so much better than postponing it, and there's so much more opportunity here of finding people who might take an interest in it. I feel that I dare do something and can do something, and things have already been dragging on for far too long.

You get cross if I make a comment, or rather you take no notice of it, and all the rest that we know, and yet I believe that there will come a time when you yourself will have to acknowledge that you've been too weak in seeing to it that I get back some of my credit with people. But anyway, we're facing the future, not the past. And again — I believe that time will bring



you to the realization that, if there had been more cordiality and warmth between us, we could have set up our own business together.

Even if you'd stayed with G&C. You said to me, indeed, that you know very well that you'll get no thanks for your pains — but are you so very sure that this isn't a misunderstanding like the one Pa himself laboured under? At any rate I won't put up with it, you can be sure of that. For there's still too much to do, even nowadays.

The other day I saw an excerpt from Zola's new book for the first time, 'L'oeuvre', which as you know is appearing as a serial in *Gil Blas*. I think that this novel will do some good if it sinks in a little in the art world. I thought the excerpt that I read was very realistic.

For my part I'll admit that something else is needed when working absolutely from nature — facility of composition — knowledge of the figure — but after all — I don't think I've been putting myself to all this trouble for years for absolutely nothing. I feel a certain power in me because, wherever I may go, I'll always have a goal — painting people as I see and know them.

As to whether we've already heard the last of *Impressionism* — to stick to the term Impressionism — I always imagine that many newcomers may still emerge in figure painting, in particular, and I'm beginning to think it increasingly desirable in a difficult time like the present that one should seek one's salvation precisely by going deeper into *high* art. For there is relatively higher and lower — *people* are more than the rest, and for that matter a whole lot harder to paint, too.

I'll do my best to make acquaintances here, and I thought that if I worked for a while with Verlat, say, I'd be in a better position to know what's going on here, and what there is to do, and how one can get into it.

So just let me scratch around, and for heaven's sake don't lose heart or weaken. I don't think that you can reasonably ask me to go back to the country for the sake of perhaps 50 francs a month less, when the whole stretch of years ahead is so closely related to the associations I have to establish in town, either here in Antwerp or later in Paris.

And I wish I could make you understand how easy it is to foresee that a great deal will change in the trade. And consequently there are many new opportunities too, if one could come up with something original. But that *that* is therefore necessary, if one wants to do something useful. It's no fault of mine and no crime when I tell you we must put more force into this or that, and if we don't have it ourselves we'll have to find friends and new

contacts. I have to earn a bit more or have a few more friends — preferably both. That's the way to get there, but it's been too tough for me recently.

As regards this month, I really do definitely have to insist that you manage to send me at least another 50 francs.

At the moment I'm losing weight, and moreover my clothes are getting too bad &c. You know very well yourself that this won't do. All the same, I have a degree of confidence that we can pull through.

But you said that if I became ill we'd be in even more of a state — I hope it won't come to that, but I would like to be a little bit more comfortable, precisely so as to prevent that.

Anyway — when one thinks how many people just go on living without ever in their lives having even a notion of care — and who always just think that everything will turn out for the best. As if people didn't starve — and no one ever perished.

I'm beginning to object more and more to your imagining yourself to be a financier and, for instance, thinking the exact opposite of me.

People aren't all alike, and if one isn't able to see that in calculating, above all, TIME must have passed over the calculation before one can consider for certain that one has calculated correctly; if one can't see this, *one is no calculator*. And a broader view of finance is precisely what characterizes many modern financiers. That's to say not exploiting, but allowing freedom of action. I know, Theo, how you yourself could perhaps be rather hard pressed. But you've never in your life had it as hard as I have for the last 10 or 12 years in a row. Can't you understand that I'm right when I say that now, perhaps, it's been long enough; in that time I've learned something I couldn't do before, so all the opportunities have been renewed and I come up against it, against always being neglected? And if it were now to be my wish to stay here again in city life for a while, then perhaps also go to a studio in Paris, will you try to prevent it? Be fair enough to let me go on, because I tell you, I'm not looking for a row and I don't want a row, but I won't allow my career to be blocked. And what can I do in the country, unless I go there with money for models and paint? There's no opportunity in the country, absolutely none, to make money from my work, and that opportunity does exist in town. So I won't be secure until I've made friends in the city, and that's the order of the day. Now for the moment it might make things a bit more difficult but it's the way, all the same, and going back to the country now would end in stagnation.

Anyway — regards — De Goncourt's book is good.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

## **Antwerp, on or about Saturday, 6 February 1886**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 559)

My dear Theo,

I've received your letter and 25 francs enclosed and I thank you very much for both. I'm really glad that you like my plan to come to Paris. I believe it will help me make progress and at the same time that, if I didn't go, I might easily get into a mess, keep moving around in the same circle too much, persist in the same mistakes. Furthermore, as for you, I don't think that coming home to a studio would do you any harm. For the rest, I have to tell you the same about me as you write about yourself — *I'll disappoint you*.

And even so, this is the way to combine forces. And even so, much greater understanding of each other can follow from it.

Now what shall I tell you about my health? I still believe that I have a chance of avoiding being really ill; all the same, I'll need time to get better. I also still have two more teeth to be filled, then my upper jaw, which was most affected, will be all right again. I still have to pay 10 francs for that, and then another 40 francs to get the bottom half right too.

Some years of those 10 years that I appear to have spent in prison will disappear as a result. Because bad teeth, which one so seldom sees any more as it's so easy to get them put right, since bad teeth give a physiognomy a sort of sunken look.

And then — even eating the same things, one can naturally digest better when one can chew properly, and so my stomach will have a chance to recover.

I really do notice that I've been at a very low ebb, though — and as you wrote yourself, all sorts of things that are even worse could arise out of neglecting it. However, we'll see that we get it put right.

I haven't worked for a few days, gone to bed early a couple of nights (otherwise it was usually 1 or 2 o'clock because of drawing at the club). And

I feel that it's calming me.

I've had a note from Ma, who writes that they're going to start packing in March.

Further, since you say you'll have to pay rent until the end of June — well then, perhaps it would be best after all if I were to return to Nuenen, starting in March, only — if I encountered opposition and scenes like I got before I left, I would be wasting my time there and so, even if it were only just for those few months, I'd make a change anyhow, since I want to have some new things from the country ready to bring to Paris with me.

That Siberdt, the teacher of the antique, who spoke to me at first as I told you, definitely *tried* to pick a quarrel with me today, perhaps with a view to getting rid of me. Which didn't work inasmuch as I said — Why are you trying to pick a quarrel with me? I have no wish to quarrel, and in any case I have absolutely no desire to contradict you, but you deliberately try to pick a quarrel with me.

He evidently hadn't expected that and couldn't say much to refute it this time, but — next time, of course, he'll be able to start something.

The issue behind it is that the fellows in the class are talking about things in my work among themselves, and I've said, not to Siberdt but outside the class to some of the fellows, that their drawings were completely wrong.

Bear in mind that if I go to Cormon and run into trouble sooner or later either with the master or the pupils, *I wouldn't let it worry me*. If need be, even if I didn't have a master, I could also go through the antique course by going to draw in the Louvre or somewhere. And so I'd do that if I had to — although I'd far rather have correction — as long as it doesn't become *DELIBERATE provocation*; that correction without one giving any cause other than a certain singularity in one's manner of working which is different from the others. If he starts on me again, I'll say out loud in the class, I'm happy to do mechanically everything that you tell me to do, because I'm determined to pay you back what is your due, if need be, if you insist on it, but — as far as mechanizing me as you mechanize the others is concerned, that has not, I assure you, the slightest hold over me.

Besides, you started by telling me something quite different, that's to say, you told me: tackle it as you wish.

The reason why I'm drawing plaster casts — *not to start from the outline, but to start from the centres* — I haven't got it yet, but I feel it more

and more and — I'll certainly carry on with it, it's too interesting.

I wish that we could spend a few days together in the Louvre and could just talk about it. I believe it would interest you.

This morning I sent you *Chérie*, mainly *for the preface*, which will certainly strike you.

And — I wish that at the end of our lives we could also walk somewhere together and — looking back, say — we've done *this* — and that's *one*; and *that* — and that's *two*; and *that* — and that's *three*. And if we want to and dare to — will there be anything to talk about then?

We can try two things — making something good ourselves — collecting things by other people that we think are good, and dealing in them. But we must *both live* rather more *robustly*, and perhaps combining forces is a step towards becoming more robust.

But now allow me to touch on a delicate matter — if I've said unpleasant things to you, specifically about our upbringing and our home, this has been because we're in an area where being critical is *essential* in order for us to get along with and understand each other and cooperate in business.

Now I can well understand that one can passionately love something or someone that one *can't* do anything about.

Very well — I won't go into that except in so far as it might make a fatal separation between us where reconciliation is needed.

And our upbringing &c. — won't prove to be so good that we'll retain many illusions about it — there you are — and we might perhaps have been happier with a different upbringing. But if we stick to the positive idea of wanting to produce and *to be something*, then we'll be able, without getting angry, to discuss *faits accomplis* as such when it's unavoidable and might perhaps touch on or directly concern the Goupils or the family. And for the rest, these issues between us are for the understanding of the situation and not out of rancour.

But if we undertake something it won't be a matter of indifference to either of us to improve our health, because we need time alive — some 25 or 30 years of working constantly. There's so much of interest in the present age when one thinks how very possible it is that we may well yet see the beginning of the end of a society. And just as there is infinite poetry in the autumn or in a sunset, and then there's so much soul and mysterious endeavour in nature, so it is now. And as for art — decline, if you will, after

the Delacroix, Corots, Millets, Duprés, Troyons, Bretons, Rousseaux, Daubignys — very well — but a decline so full of charm — that there truly is still an immense, immense amount of good things to come, and they're being made every day.

I'm longing dreadfully for the Louvre, Luxembourg etc., where everything will be so new to me.

For the rest of my life I'll regret that I didn't see the Cent chefs d'oeuvre, the Delacroix exhibition and the Meissonier exhibition. But there will still be plenty of opportunities to catch up. It's true, for instance, that wanting to progress too quickly here, I may actually have progressed less, but what would you? My health is also behind it, and if I regain that as I hope to do, then my taking pains will have been less in vain.

After all, I believe that if one asks permission, one may draw plaster casts in the Louvre, even if one isn't at L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

It wouldn't surprise me if, once the idea of living together takes hold, you'll find it odder and odder that we've been together so surprisingly little, if you will — for fully 10 years.

Anyway, I most certainly hope that this will be the end of it, and that it won't begin again.

What you say about the apartment is perhaps really rather expensive. I mean, I'd be just as happy if it weren't quite as good.

I'm curious as to how those few months in Nuenen will be for me. Since I have some furniture there, since it's beautiful there, too, and I know the district a little, it might be a good thing for me to keep a pied-à-terre there, if need be in an inn where I could leave that furniture, since otherwise it will be lost — and it could still come in very useful.

There's sometimes the most to do by returning to old places.

I must finish this now, since I'm going to the club.

Keep thinking about what we can best do. Regards.

Yours truly,  
Vincent.

**Paris, September or October 1886**

To Horace Mann Livens (letter 569)

My dear Mr Livens,

Since I am here in Paris I have very often thought of your self and work. You will remember that I liked your colour, your ideas on art and litterature and I add, most of all, your personality.

I have already before now thought that I ought to let you know what I was doing, where I was.

But what refrained me was that I find living in Paris is much dearer than in Antwerp and not knowing what your circumstances are I dare not say Come over to Paris, without warning you that it costs one dearer than Antwerp and that if poor, one has to suffer many things. As you may imagine. But on the other hand there is more chance of selling.

There is also a good chance of exchanging pictures with other artists.

In one word, with much energy, with a sincere personal feeling of colour in nature I would say an artist can get on here notwithstanding the many obstructions. And I intend remaining here still longer.

There is much to be seen here – for instance *Delacroix* to name only one master.

In Antwerp I did not even know what the Impressionists were, now I have seen them and though *not* being one of the club yet I have much admired certain Impressionist pictures – DEGAS, nude figure – Claude Monet, landscape.

And now for what regards what I myself have been doing, I have lacked money for paying models, else I had entirely given myself to figure painting but I have made a series of colour studies in painting simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotys. White and rose roses, yellow chrysantemums – seeking oppositions of blue with orange, red and green, yellow and violet, seeking THE BROKEN AND NEUTRAL TONES to harmonise brutal extremes.

Trying to render intense COLOUR and not a GREY harmony.

Now after these gymnastics I lately did two heads which I dare say are better in light and colour than those I did before.

So as we said at the time in COLOUR seeking LIFE, the true drawing is modelling with colour.

I did a dozen landscapes too, frankly *green*, frankly *blue*.

And so I am struggling for life and progress in art.

Now I would very much like to know what you are doing and whether you ever think of going to Paris.



If ever you did come here, write to me before and I will, if you like, share my lodgings and studio with you so long as I have any. In spring – say February or even sooner – I may be going to the south of France, the land of the *blue* tones and gay colours.

And look here, if I knew you had longings for the same we might combine. I felt sure at the time that you are a thorough colourist and since I saw the Impressionists I assure you that neither your colour nor mine as it is developping itself, is *exactly* the same as their theories but so much dare I say, we have a chance and a good one of finding friends.

I hope your health is all right. I was rather low down in health when in Antwerp but got better here.

Write to me, in any case remember me to Allan, Briët, Rink, Durand, but I have not so often thought on any of them as I did think of you – almost daily.

Shaking hands cordially.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

My present adress is

Mr Vincent van Gogh  
54 Rue Lepic  
*Paris*

What regards my chances of sale, look here, they are certainly not much but still *I do have* a beginning.

At this present moment I have found four dealers who have exhibited studies of mine. And I have exchanged studies with several artists.

Now the prices are 50 francs. Certainly not much but – as far as I can see one must sell cheap to rise, and even at costing price. And mind my dear fellow, Paris is Paris, there is but one Paris and however hard living may be here and if it became worse and harder even – the french air clears up the brain and does one good – a world of good.

I have been in Cormons studio for three or four months but did not find that as useful as I had expected it to be. It may be my fault however, any how I left there too as I left Antwerp and since I worked alone, and fancy that since I feel my own self more.

Trade is slow here, the great dealers sell Millet, Delacroix, Corot, Daubigny, Dupré, a few other masters at exorbitant prices. They do little or nothing for young artists. The second class dealers contrariwise sell those but at very low prices. If I asked more I would do nothing, I fancy. However I have faith in colour, even what regards the price the public will pay for it in the longer run.

But for the present things are awfully hard, therefore let anyone who risks to go over here consider there is no laying on roses at all.

What is to be gained is PROGRESS and, what the deuce, that it is to be found here I dare ascertain. Anyone who has a solid position elsewhere, let him stay where he is but for adventurers as myself I think they lose nothing in risking more. Especially as in my case I am not an adventurer by choice but by fate and feeling nowhere so much myself a stranger as in my family and country.

Kindly remember me to your landlady Mrs *Roosmaelen* and say her that if she will exhibit something of my work I will send her a small picture of mine.

## **Paris, late October 1887**

To Willemien van Gogh (letter 574)

My dear little sister,

I thank you for your letter, although for my part I so detest writing these days, however there are questions in your letter that I do want to answer.

I must begin by contradicting you where you say that you thought Theo looked 'so wretched' this summer.

For my part, I think on the contrary that Theo's appearance has become much more distinguished in the last year.

You have to be strong to endure life in Paris the way he has for so many years.

But might it not be that Theo's family and friends in Amsterdam and The Hague haven't treated him and even not received him with the cordiality that he deserved from them and to which he was entitled?

I can tell you in that regard that he was perhaps a little hurt by this, but he's otherwise not letting it bother him, and now, when times are so bad in

paintings, he's still doing business, so it could be there's some professional jealousy on the part of his Dutch friends.

Now what shall I say about your little piece about the plants and the rain? You see for yourself in nature that many a flower is trampled, freezes or is parched, further that not every grain of wheat, once it has ripened, ends up in the earth again to germinate there and become a stalk — but far and away the most grains do *not* develop but go to the mill — don't they?

Now comparing people with grains of wheat — in every person who's healthy and natural there's *the power to germinate* as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is *germinating*.

What the power to germinate is in wheat, so love is in us. Now we, I think, stand there pulling a long face or at a loss for words when, being thwarted in our natural development, we see that germination frustrated and ourselves placed in circumstances as hopeless as they must be for the wheat between the millstones.

If this happens to us and we're utterly bewildered by the loss of our natural life, there are some among us who, willing to submit themselves to the course of things as they are, nonetheless don't abandon their self-awareness and want to know how things are with them and what's actually happening. And searching with good intentions in the books of which it is said they are a light in the darkness, with the best will in the world we find precious little certain at all and not always satisfaction to comfort us personally. And the diseases from which we civilized people suffer the most are melancholia and pessimism.

Like me, for instance, who can count so many years in my life when I completely lost all inclination to laugh, leaving aside whether or not this was my own fault, I for one need above all just to have a good laugh. I found that in *Guy de Maupassant* and there are others here, Rabelais among the old writers, Henri Rochefort among today's, where one can find that — *Voltaire in CANDIDE*.

On the contrary, if one wants truth, life as it is, De Goncourt, for example, in *Germinie Lacerteux*, *La fille Elisa*, Zola in *La joie de vivre* and *L'assommoir* and so many other masterpieces paint life as we feel it ourselves and thus satisfy that need which we have, that people tell us the truth.

The work of the French naturalists Zola, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, De Goncourt, Richepin, Daudet, Huysmans is magnificent and one can

scarcely be said to belong to one's time if one isn't familiar with them. Maupassant's masterpiece is *Bel-ami*; I hope to be able to get it for you.

Is the Bible enough for us? Nowadays I believe Jesus himself would again say to those who just sit melancholy, *it is not here, it is risen. Why seek ye the living among the dead?*

If the spoken or written word is to remain the light of the world, it's our right and our duty to acknowledge that we live in an age in which it's written in such a way, spoken in such a way that in order to find something as great and as good and as original, and just as capable of overturning the whole old society as in the past, we can safely compare it with the old upheaval by the Christians.

For my part, I'm always glad that I've read the Bible better than many people nowadays, just because it gives me a certain peace that there have been such lofty ideas in the past. But precisely because I think the old is good, I find the new all the more so. All the more so because we can take action ourselves in our own age, and both the past and the future affect us only indirectly.

My own fortunes dictate above all that I'm making rapid progress in growing up into a little old man, you know, with wrinkles, with a bristly beard, with a number of false teeth &c.

But what does that matter? I have a dirty and difficult occupation, painting, and if I weren't as I am I wouldn't paint, but being as I am I often work with pleasure, and I see the possibility glimmering through of making paintings in which there's some youth and freshness, although my own youth is one of those things I've lost. If I didn't have Theo it wouldn't be possible for me to do justice to my work, but because I have him as a friend I believe that I'll make more progress and that things will run their course. It's my plan to go to the south for a while, as soon as I can, where there's even more colour and even more sun.

But what I hope to achieve is to paint a good portrait. Anyway.

Now to get back to your little piece, I feel uneasy about assuming for my own use or recommending to others for theirs the belief that powers above us intervene personally to help us or to comfort us. Providence is such a strange thing, and I tell you that I definitely don't know what to make of it.

Well, in your piece there's always a certain sentimentality and in its form, above all, it's reminiscent of the stories about providence already referred to above, let's say the providence in question, stories that so

repeatedly failed to hold water and against which so very much could be said.

And above all I find it a very worrying matter that you believe you have to study in order to write. No, my dear little sister, learn to dance or fall in love with one or more notary's clerks, officers, in short whoever's within your reach; rather, much rather commit any number of follies than study in Holland, it serves absolutely no purpose other than to make someone dull, and so I won't hear of it.

For my part, I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which, as a rule, I emerge only with shame and disgrace.

And in this I'm absolutely right, in my own view, because I tell myself that in earlier years, when I should have been in love, I immersed myself in religious and socialist affairs and considered art more sacred, more than now. Why are religion or law or art so sacred? People who do nothing other than be in love are perhaps more serious and holier than those who sacrifice their love and their heart to an idea. Be this as it may, to write a book, to perform a deed, to make a painting with life in it, one must be a living person oneself. And so for you, unless you never want to progress, studying is very much a side issue. Enjoy yourself as much as you can and have as many distractions as you can, and be aware that what people want in art nowadays has to be very lively, with strong colour, very intense. So intensify your own health and strength and life a little, that's the best study.

It would please me if you would write and tell me how Margot Begemann is doing and how they're doing at De Groot's. How did that business turn out? Did Sien de Groot marry her cousin? And did her child live? What I think about my own work is that the painting of the peasants eating potatoes that I did in Nuenen is after all the best thing I did. Only since then I haven't had the opportunity to find models, but on the contrary have had the opportunity to study the question of colour. And if I do find models for my figures again later, then I hope to show that I'm looking for something other than little green landscapes or flowers. Last year I painted almost nothing but flowers to accustom myself to a colour other than grey, that's to say pink, soft or bright green, light blue, violet, yellow, orange, fine red. And when I painted landscape in Asnières this summer I saw more colour in it than before. I'm studying this now in portraits. And I have to tell you that I'm painting none the worse for it, perhaps because I could tell you

very many bad things about both painters and paintings if I wanted to, just as easily as I could tell you good things about them.

I don't want to be one of the melancholics or those who become sour and bitter and morbid. To understand all is to forgive all, and I believe that *if* we knew everything we'd arrive at a certain serenity. Now having this serenity as much as possible, even when one knows — little — nothing — for certain, is perhaps a better remedy against all ills than what's sold in the chemist's. *A lot comes of its own accord*, one grows and develops of one's own accord.

So don't study and swot too much, because that makes for sterility. Enjoy yourself too much rather than too little, and don't take art or love too seriously either — one can do little about it oneself, it's mostly a matter of temperament. If I were living near you, I'd try to make you understand that it might be more practical for you to paint with me than to write, and that you might be more able to express your feelings that way. At any rate I can do something about painting personally, but as far as writing's concerned I'm not in the business. Anyway, it's not a bad idea for you to want to become an artist, because if one has fire in one, and soul, one can't keep stifling them and — one would rather burn than suffocate. What's inside must get out. Me, for instance, it gives me air when I make a painting, and without that I'd be unhappier than I am. Give Ma my very warmest regards.

Vincent

A la recherche du bonheur affected me very greatly. Now I've just read *Mont-Oriol* by Guy de Maupassant. Art often seems to be something very lofty and, as you say, something sacred. But that's true of love too. And the problem is simply that not everyone thinks about it like that, and those who feel something of it and allow themselves to be swept away by it suffer greatly, firstly because of being misunderstood, but as much because our inspiration is so often inadequate or the work is made impossible by circumstances. One should be able to do two or preferably several things at the same time.

And there are times when it's by no means clear to us that art should be something sacred or good.

Anyway, think carefully about whether it isn't better, if one has a feeling for art and wants to work in it, to say that one is doing it because one

was created with that feeling and can't do anything else and is following one's nature, than to say one is doing it for a good cause.

Does it not say in *A la recherche du bonheur* that evil lies in our own natures — which we didn't create ourselves?

What I think is so good about the moderns is that they don't moralize like the old ones.

It seems coarse to many people, for instance, and they're angered by it: vice and virtue are chemical products like sugar and vitriol.





*Pollard Willow*, 1882

‘I’ve attacked that old giant of a pollard willow, and I believe it has turned out the best of the watercolours.’ [Letter 252](#)





*The Potato Eaters*, 1885

‘I plan to make a start this week on that thing with the peasants around a dish of potatoes in the evening’ [Letter 490](#)

‘Although I’ll have painted the actual painting in a relatively short time, and largely from memory, it’s taken a whole winter of painting studies of heads and hands.’ [Letter 497](#)

‘I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these folk, who are eating their potatoes by the light of their little lamp, have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of MANUAL LABOUR and – that they have thus honestly *earned* their food.’ [Letter 497](#)





*The Harvest, 1888*

‘The colour here is actually very fine; when the vegetation is fresh it’s a rich green the like of which we seldom see in the north, calm. When it gets scorched and dusty it doesn’t become ugly, but then a landscape takes on tones of gold of every shade, green-gold, yellow-gold, red-gold, ditto bronze, copper, in short from lemon yellow to the dull yellow colour of, say, a pile of threshed grain.’ [Letter 626](#)







*Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin, 1888*

‘Here’s an impression of mine, which is the result of a portrait that I painted in the mirror, and which Theo has: a pink-grey face with green eyes, ash-coloured hair, wrinkles in forehead and around the mouth, stiffly wooden, a very red beard, quite unkempt and sad’ [Letter 626](#)



*The Yellow House ('The street'), 1888*

'I live in a little yellow house with green door and shutters, whitewashed inside — on the white walls — very brightly coloured Japanese drawings — red tiles on the floor — the house in the full sun — and a bright blue sky above it and — the shadow in the middle of the day much shorter than at home.' [Letter 626](#)

'a square no. 30 canvas showing the house and its surroundings under a sulphur sun, under a pure cobalt sky. That's a really difficult subject! But I want to conquer it for that very reason. Because it's tremendous, these yellow houses in the sunlight and then the incomparable freshness of the blue. All the ground's yellow, too. ... the house to the left is pink, with green shutters; the one that's shaded by a tree, that's the restaurant where I go to eat supper every day. My friend the postman lives at the bottom of the street on the left, between the two railway bridges.' [Letter 691](#)





*The Night Café*, 1888

‘In my painting of the night café I’ve tried to express the idea that the café is a place where you can ruin yourself, go mad, commit crimes. Anyway, I tried with contrasts of delicate pink and blood-red and wine-red. Soft Louis XV and Veronese green contrasting with yellow greens and hard blue greens. All of that in an ambience of a hellish furnace, in pale sulphur.’ [Letter 677](#)







*Starry Night over the Rhône*, 1888

‘Included herewith little croquis of a square no. 30 canvas — the starry sky at last, actually painted at night, under a gas-lamp. ... Against the green-blue field of the sky the Great Bear has a green and pink sparkle whose discreet paleness contrasts with the harsh gold of the gaslight.’

[Letter 691](#)





*The Bedroom*, 1888

'I did, for my decoration once again, a no. 30 canvas of my bedroom with the whitewood furniture that you know. Ah, well, it amused me enormously doing this bare interior. ... In flat tints, but coarsely brushed in full impasto, the walls pale lilac, the floor in a broken and faded red, the chairs and the bed chrome yellow, the pillows and the sheet very pale lemon green, the bedspread blood-red, the dressing-table orange, the washbasin blue, the window green. I had wished to express *utter repose* with all these very different tones, you see, among which the only white is the little note given by the mirror with a black frame' [Letter 706](#)





*Sunflowers*, 1889

‘But you’ll see these big paintings of bouquets of 12, 14 sunflowers stuffed into this tiny little boudoir with a pretty bed and everything else elegant. It won’t be commonplace.’ [Letter 677](#)

‘if Jeannin has the peony, Quost the hollyhock, I indeed, before others, have taken the sunflower.’ [Letter 739](#)





*Lullaby: Madame Augustine Roulin Rocking a Cradle (La Berceuse)*, 1889

‘Today I made a fresh start on the canvas I had painted of Mrs Roulin, the one which had remained in a vague state as regards the hands because of my accident. As an arrangement of colours: the reds moving through to pure oranges, intensifying even more in the flesh tones up to the chromes, passing into the pinks and marrying with the olive and Veronese greens. As an Impressionist arrangement of colours, I’ve never devised anything better.’ [Letter 739](#)



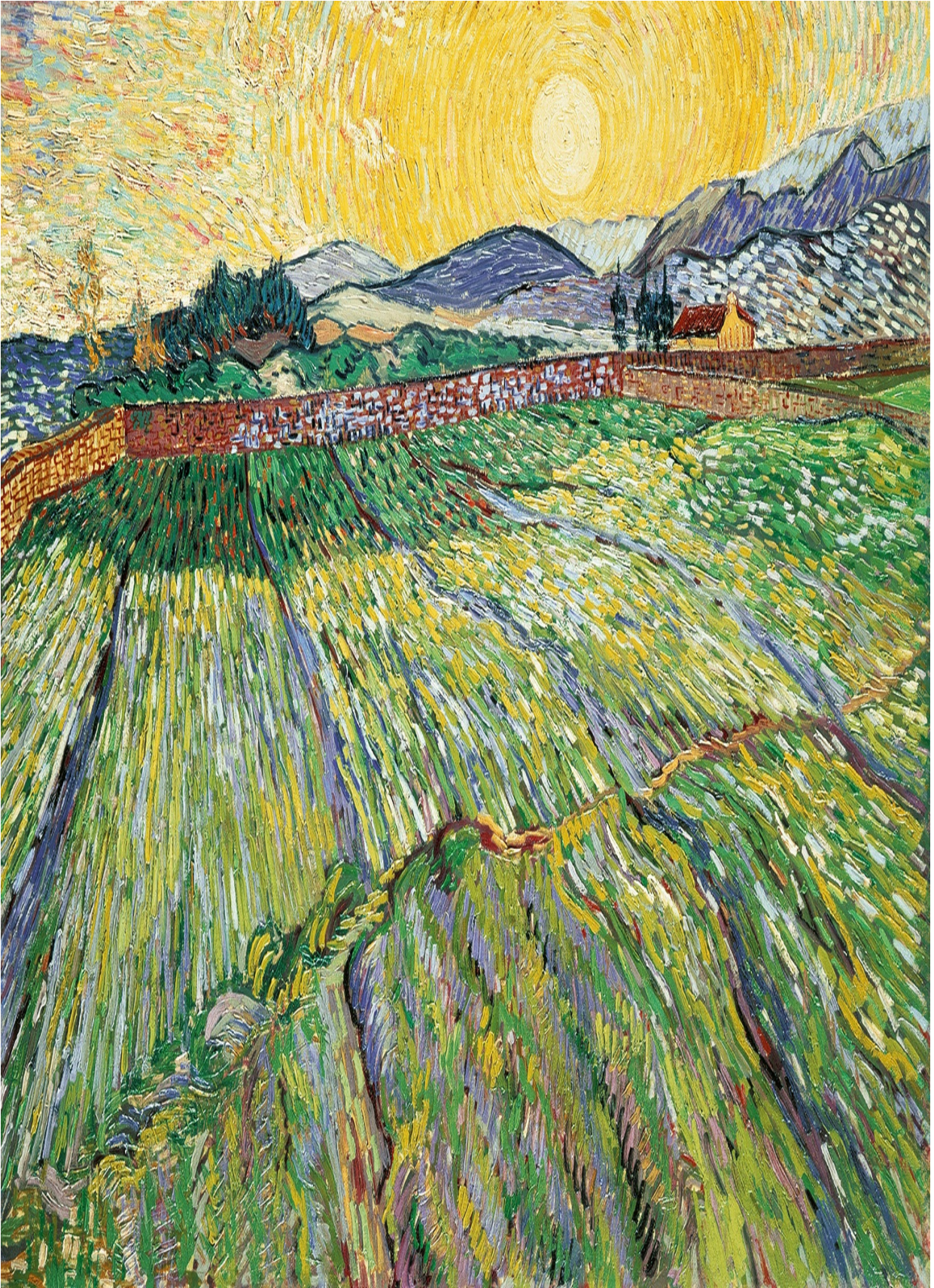




*Hospital at Saint-Rémy, 1889*

‘As for me, I’m going for at least 3 months into an asylum at St-Rémy, not far from here. In all I’ve had 4 big crises in which I hadn’t the slightest idea of what I said, wanted, did.’ [Letter 764](#)







*Enclosed Field with Rising Sun, 1889*

‘Another canvas depicts a sun rising over a field of new wheat. Receding lines of the furrows run high up on the canvas, towards a wall and a range of lilac hills. The field is violet and green-yellow. The white sun is surrounded by a large yellow aureole. In it, in contrast to the other canvas, I have tried to express calm, a great peace.’ [Letter 822](#)



*Almond Blossom*, 1890

‘For Theo and Jo’s little one I brought back a rather large painting – which they’ve hung above the piano – white almond blossoms – big branches on a sky-blue background’ [Letter 879](#)







*Doctor Gachet sitting at a table with books and a glass with foxglove, 1890*

‘Mr Gachet is absolutely *fanatical* about this portrait ... I feel that at his place I can do not too bad a painting every time I go there, and he’ll certainly continue to invite me to dinner each Sunday or Monday.’ [Letter 877](#)



*Wheatfield with Crows, 1890*

‘I’ve painted another three large canvases ... They’re immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness. You’ll see



this soon, I hope – for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I'd almost believe that these canvases will tell you what I can't say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside.' [Letter 898](#)



*Daubigny's Garden, 1890*

'Now the third canvas is Daubigny's garden, a painting I'd been thinking about ever since I've been here.' [Letter 898](#)

‘Foreground of green and pink grass, on the left a green and lilac bush and a stem of plants with whitish foliage. In the middle a bed of roses. To the right a hurdle, a wall, and above the wall a hazel tree with violet foliage. Then a hedge of lilac, a row of rounded yellow lime trees. The house itself in the background, pink with a roof of bluish tiles. A bench and 3 chairs, a dark figure with a yellow hat, and in the foreground a black cat. Sky pale green.’ [Letter 902](#)

# His Best Days

## Arles, February 1888–December 1888

After a stay of two years, Van Gogh needed to escape his life in Paris: the artistic quarrels of the city's avant-garde circles, his often strained relationship with Theo, and the bohemian lifestyle that was damaging his already fragile state of health. Lured south by the prospect of brighter light, vivid colour, sunshine and the peace of the countryside, Van Gogh left Paris on 19 February 1888 and travelled to Arles, in Provence, where he rented a room in the Carrel hotel at 30 rue Cavalerie, not far from the railway station in the north of the city.

Whenever Van Gogh moved, his first letters give a vivid impression of his new surroundings, and Arles was no exception. He thought the landscape and the inhabitants exceedingly picturesque, but life was not going to be as inexpensive as he had hoped. At the beginning of each new artistic adventure, he invariably underestimated the expense involved.

Though his life had now changed fundamentally, Van Gogh's thoughts were, for a number of reasons, still anchored largely in Paris. He repeatedly asked Theo for news about this or that person, and he started to correspond with Emile Bernard. At the same time, Van Gogh was continually hatching plans to exhibit the work of modern artists (whom he referred to collectively as 'Impressionists') outside Paris.

Just as Van Gogh was planning to collaborate with Theo on exhibiting and selling his own work and that of his friends in nearby Marseille, he had a modest success in Paris: three of his works were included in the exhibition mounted by the Société des Artistes Indépendants. Apart from the exhibitions he had organized himself and several works given on consignment to small art dealers, this was the first public acknowledgment of his place among the artists of the avant-garde. For someone who longed so fervently for recognition, his comments are strikingly laconic. In later years, Van Gogh's reaction was the same: any praise or sign of recognition caused him to retreat, as though he were afraid of falling into a trap and losing his independence.







The Yellow House (on the right), where Van Gogh lived in Arles

In the meantime Van Gogh was working as much as possible. Although he remained modest about his own talent compared with that of other artists, he had left Paris with increased confidence in his abilities and the feeling that he was 'on firmer ground' (602). Nature in the surrounding countryside was glorious, and the light and colours enthralled him. In the spring, when the fruit trees were decked out in the most colourful blossom, he made one painting after another. To mount such a campaign, he needed large quantities of paint and canvas, which he asked Theo to send. He also explored the landscape throughout the area, with its canals and drawbridges, farmhouses in the fields, and views of the countryside outside Arles.

When he needed to save his money, he made drawings in ink and reed pen. He cut his reed pens himself from reeds he found during his walks along the canals. These pen-and-ink drawings, which display a very personal style, represent the prelude to a long series of masterly works that Van Gogh was to make in the south of France. He admired the Japanese draughtsmen who could capture a figure or landscape with a few simple strokes of the pen or brush. Van Gogh himself, however, achieved an equally admirable and seemingly effortless style of drawing that was unlike anything else being done at the time.

After a three-day trip to the coast, he again took up a subject that he had neglected since leaving Brabant: rural life, in this case the wheat harvest in the fields around Arles. In shimmering yellows he painted fields, sheaves of wheat and haystacks under an intensely blue Mediterranean sky.

He also resumed portrait painting. Even though he was a loner, Van Gogh tried to make contact with the people of Arles. His eccentric behaviour prevented him from building up a large circle of friends, but he struck up a friendship with the postman Joseph Roulin, whose portrait he painted on many occasions. Several months later he also persuaded Roulin's wife to pose for him; their children could not avoid having their portraits painted either. Roulin had outspoken political opinions to which Van Gogh gladly listened. Using large areas of the strongest possible colours, Van Gogh bestowed on these works an intensity never before seen in his portraits. A different kind of contact was the friendship he enjoyed with several artists who were staying in the vicinity of Arles, such as Dodge MacKnight, whom he knew from Paris, the Danish artist Christian Mourier-Petersen and the Belgian Eugène Boch.



Paul Gauguin, 1891

A subject that continually arises in Van Gogh's letters is the fragile health of both brothers. Even though Vincent seemed hopeful and energetic during his first months in Arles, he nevertheless wrote in July about a 'crisis'

(645) that probably refers to the physical ailments he had when he left Paris, mainly stomach trouble. Theo had persistent physical complaints, such as a chronic cough and fatigue. In retrospect, it seems likely that he was suffering from syphilis, the probable cause of his death. Vincent's ailments, on the other hand, were presumably the result of too much work and too little rest, an unhealthy diet, and too much alcohol. His doctor in Paris had advised a strict regimen: nutritious food, eating and sleeping at regular times, and limited contact with 'women' (i.e., prostitutes). There was also a psychological side to these ailments, however. Sometimes Vincent was overcome by dejection and melancholy; Theo, too, was familiar with such moods.

Vincent meanwhile had rented a small house on place Lamartine in Arles. At first he used his 'yellow house' only as a studio, but he began to see it as a means of realizing his dream of working together with Paul Gauguin in Arles. In this Studio of the South they would be able to strike out on the path to the future of painting: collaboration and solidarity. Theo was willing to give financial support to this adventure in exchange for a certain number of Gauguin's works (he already had Vincent's at his disposal). But it was months before Gauguin, who was working in Brittany at the time, was ready to take the step.

Van Gogh began his preparations in a spirit of hope. He furnished his house as their living quarters – which put considerable strain on Theo's budget – and decided to decorate it with paintings, turning it into a true artists' house. In these very months – the summer and autumn of 1888 – Vincent created a series of works, which are now icons of modern art: sunflowers in a vase, a café at night, numerous portraits, park views and his bedroom. He was at the height of his powers, and he knew it. This demanded the utmost of him, both physically and mentally.

Gauguin arrived on 23 October. At first Van Gogh was happy to have the company of 'a really great artist and a really excellent friend' (719). They painted outdoors, as well as in the brothels of Arles, where Gauguin, according to Van Gogh, enjoyed great success. During a spell of bad weather, they worked together in the small studio in the Yellow House, where Van Gogh, who always based his works on reality, obeyed Gauguin's mantra to work from memory and the imagination. They also discussed art and literature, of course, and the fundamental differences in their artistic notions became increasingly clear.

The low point came on the evening of 23 December, exactly two months after Gauguin's arrival. In the Yellow House, Van Gogh cut off his ear, which he brought to a prostitute in the nearby red-light district. He was taken to a hospital the next morning. Theo, who learned of the incident from a telegram sent by Gauguin, set off that same evening for Arles to be with Vincent. One day later – on Christmas Day – Theo returned to Paris with Gauguin. The dream of a shared studio, which had briefly come true, was now shattered.

## **Arles, Sunday, 18 March 1888**

To Emile Bernard (letter 587)

[[sketch A](#)]

My dear Bernard,

Having promised to write to you, I want to begin by telling you that this part of the world seems to me as beautiful as Japan for the clearness of the atmosphere and the gay colour effects. The stretches of water make patches of a beautiful emerald and a rich blue in the landscapes, as we see it in the Japanese prints. Pale orange sunsets making the fields look blue — glorious yellow suns. However, so far I've hardly seen this part of the world in its usual summer splendour. The women's costume is pretty, and especially on the boulevard on Sunday you see some very naive and well-chosen arrangements of colour. And that, too, will doubtless get even livelier in summer.





Mon cher Bernard, ayant promis de  
 l'écrire, je veux commencer par te  
 dire que le pays me paraît aussi  
 beau que le Japon pour la limpidité  
 de l'atmosphère et les effets de couleur  
 qu'il. Les eaux font des tâches d'un  
 bel émeraude et d'un riche bleu dans les  
 paysages ainsi que nous le voyons  
 dans les creux. Des couchers de soleil  
 orange pâle faisant paraître bleus les  
 terrains. Des soleils jaunes splendides.  
 Cependant je n'ai encore guère vu le  
 pays dans sa splendeur habituelle d'été.  
 Le costume des femmes est joli et le dimanche  
 surtout on voit sur le boulevard des  
 arrangements de couleur très-naïfs et  
 bien trouvés. Et cela aussi sans doute  
 s'égayera encore en été.



I regret that living here isn't as cheap as I'd hoped, and until now I haven't found a way of getting by as easily as one could do in Pont-Aven. I started out paying 5 francs and now I'm on 4 francs a day. One would need to know the local patois, and know how to eat bouillabaisse and aioli, then one would surely find an inexpensive family boarding-house. Then if there were several of us, I'm inclined to believe we'd get more favourable terms. Perhaps there'd be a real advantage in emigrating to the south for many artists in love with sunshine and colour. The Japanese may not be making progress in their country, but there's no doubt that their art is being carried on in France. At the top of this letter I'm sending you a little croquis of a study that's preoccupying me as to how to make something of it — sailors coming back with their sweethearts towards the town, which projects the strange silhouette of its drawbridge against a huge yellow sun.

I have another study of the same drawbridge with a group of washerwomen. Shall be happy to have a line from you to know what you're doing and where you're going to go. A very warm handshake to you and the friends.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

## **Arles, on or about Tuesday, 3 April 1888**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 592)

My dear Theo,

I'm in a fury of work as the trees are in blossom and I wanted to do a Provence orchard of tremendous gaiety — writing to you in a calm frame of mind presents serious difficulties, yesterday I wrote some letters that I later destroyed. I continue every day to feel that we're obliged to do something in Holland — that we need to launch it with all the fervour of the sansculottes, with a French gaiety worthy of the cause we're pleading.

So here's a plan of attack that will cost us some of the best paintings we've made together, definitely worth let's say a bundle off thousand-vrenc

pills, well anyway they'll have cost us money and a good slice out of our lives.

But it would be a *loud and clear* reply to certain muffled insinuations treating us more or less as if we were already dead, and a revenge for your trip last year when the welcome they gave you was lacking in warmth &c. Enough.

Let's suppose, then, that first of all we gave Jet Mauve the *Souvenir de Mauve*.

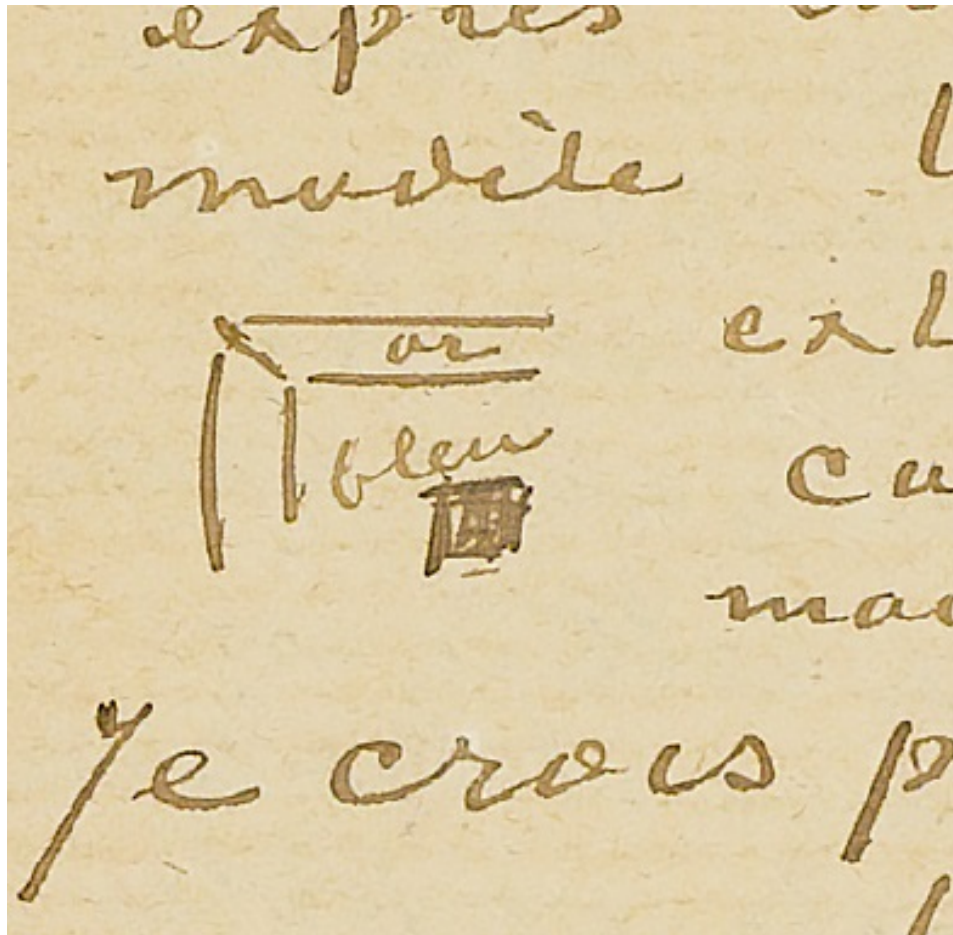
Let's suppose I dedicate a study to Breitner (I have one exactly like the study I exchanged with L. Pissarro and Reid's one, oranges, foreground white, background blue).

Let's suppose we also gave our sister some study or other.

Let's suppose we gave the modern museum in The Hague, since we have so many memories in The Hague, the 2 Montmartre landscapes exhibited at the Independents'.

There's one more thing that's not at all easy. With Tersteeg having written to you 'send me some Impressionists, but only paintings you yourself think are among the best', and you having for your part included one of my paintings in this consignment, I'm in the uncomfortable position of *convincing* Tersteeg I really am an Impressionist of the Petit Boulevard and that I expect to retain that position. Ah well, he'll have one of my paintings in his own collection — I've been thinking about it these past few days and I've found a funny thing of a kind I'm not going to do every day. It's the drawbridge with a little yellow carriage and group of washerwomen, a study in which the fields are a bright orange, the grass very green, the sky and the water blue.

It just needs a frame designed specially for it, in royal blue and gold like this, the flat part blue, the outer strip gold. [[sketch A](#)] If necessary, the frame can be of blue plush, but it would be better to paint it.



592A. Corner of a frame

I think I can assure you that what I'm making here is better than my campaign in Asnières last spring.

Nothing is absolutely decided in the whole plan except for the dedication in memory of Mauve and the dedication to Tersteeg. I haven't yet managed to get a line written to tell him, but I'll manage it, as the painting's done it'll come to me all by itself, but you're well aware that we have the power in us to oblige them to talk about us if it so pleases us, and we can carry on the work of introducing the Impressionists there with the greatest calmness and self-assurance.

If you see Reid again it would be a good idea to tell him we don't have much confidence in the success of ambitious people and that we prefer to do good work, that we were surprised at his ways of behaving, which in the end were inexplicable, and that since then we no longer know what to think of him. I think Russell is trying to make peace between Reid and me, and that he wrote the letter precisely with that in mind. I'll certainly write to Russell

saying I told Reid bluntly that I was sure it was a mistake on his part and crazy to like paintings that are dead and to have no regard for living artists. That in any case I hoped to see him change in that respect.

As soon as I received the letter I had to spend almost everything on colours and canvases, and I'd be very pleased if it were possible for you to send me something extra in the next few days. The painting of the garden with lovers is at the Théâtre Libre. Boyer, the framer, still has a lithograph, the old man with a bald head.

I'd like you to get the consignment that I'm going to make for you before Tersteeg arrives in Paris, and you can put the apple trees in blossom in the room. I'm really glad it's going well with Koning and that you aren't living alone. What a bad business with Vignon, no doubt Mr Gendre was involved, I wish Mr Gendre nothing but ill, he does too much of it to other people. It's a sad end for *père* Martin. I still can't manage a letter to you of the kind I'd like, work is absorbing me completely. Well, first and foremost it's to tell you I'd like to do some studies intended for Holland, and after that leave Holland alone for ever. Thinking of Mauve, J.H. Weissenbruch, Tersteeg, our mother and Wil, in the past few days, I've felt more emotion than perhaps reasonable, and it calms me down to say to myself that we'll do some paintings for there. And after that I'll forget them and I'll probably think only about the Petit Boulevard.

Rest assured that Tersteeg won't refuse the painting, and that it's a firm decision that that one and the one for Jet Mauve will go to Holland.

For my part I won't write to Tersteeg direct, if I say something to him I'll send the letter to you with the painting.

**Arles, Tuesday, 1 May 1888**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 602)

My dear Theo,

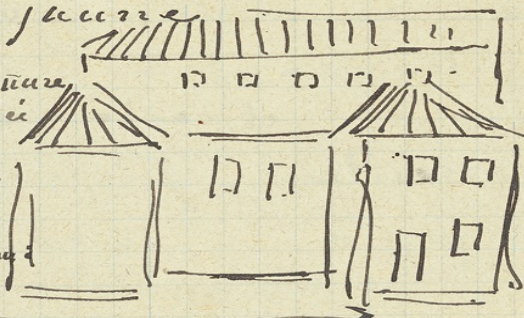
Thank you very much for your letter and the 50-franc note it contained. It's not in black that I see the future, but I see it bristling with many difficulties, and at times I wonder if these won't be stronger than I am. This is especially

so at times of physical weakness, and last week I suffered from a toothache that was so agonizing that it made me waste time quite in spite of myself. Nevertheless, I've just sent you a roll of small pen drawings, a dozen I think. That way you'll see that even though I'd stopped painting I haven't stopped working. Among them you'll find a hasty croquis on yellow paper, a lawn in the public garden at the entrance to the town. And in the background a house more or less like this one. [[sketch A](#)] Ah, well — today I rented the right-hand wing of this building, which contains 4 rooms, or more precisely, two, with two little rooms.



Mon cher Theo merci beaucoup de ta lettre  
et du billet de 50 fr. qu'elle contenait. Ce  
n'est pas en noir que je vois l'avenir mais je  
le vois très heurté de difficultés et par moments  
je me demande si ces dernières ne seront pas  
plus fortes que moi. Cela c'est surtout dans  
les moments de faiblesse physique et la  
semaine dernière je souffrais d'un mal de dents  
assez cruel pour qu'il m'ait bien malgré moi  
fait perdre du temps. Pourtant je viens de  
l'envoyer un rouleau de petits dessins à la  
plume une douzaine j'en crois. Par où tu verras  
que si j'avais cessé d'espérer j'aurais cessé de  
travailler. Tu y trouveras un croquis

basé sur papier jaune  
une pelouse dans laquelle  
qui se trouve ~~au~~ à l'entrée  
de la ville. et au fond  
d'une balise ~~du~~ à peu  
près comme ceci -



Ch bien - j'ai aujourd'hui  
loué l'aile droite  
de cette construction qui contient 4 pièces  
ou plutôt deux avec deux cabinets.

C'est peint en jaune dehors blanc à la  
chaux à l'intérieur. ~~en~~ au plein soleil  
je l'ai loué à raison de 15 francs par mois.

It's painted yellow outside, whitewashed inside — in the full sunshine. I've rented it for 15 francs a month. Now what I'd like to do would be to furnish a room, the one on the first floor, to be able to sleep there. The studio, the store, will remain here for the whole of the campaign here in the south, and that way I have my independence from petty squabbles over guest-houses, which are ruinous and depress me. In fact, Bernard writes me that he too has *a whole house*, but he has it for nothing. What luck. I'll certainly make another drawing of it for you, better than the first croquis. And at this point I dare tell you that I intend to invite Bernard and some other people to send me canvases to show them here if the opportunity arises, and it will certainly arise in Marseille. I hope I've been lucky this time — you understand, yellow outside, white inside, right out in the sun, at last I'll see my canvases in a really bright interior. The floor's made of red bricks. And outside, the public garden, of which you'll find two more drawings.

The drawings, I dare assure you, will become even better.

I've had a letter from Russell, who has bought a *Guillaumin* and 2 or 3 *Bernards*. I'm extremely pleased about that, he also writes that he'll exchange studies with me. I wouldn't be afraid of anything unless it was this bloody health. And yet I'm better than in Paris, and if my stomach has become terribly weak that's a problem I picked up there, probably due mainly to the bad wine, of which I drank too much. Here the wine is just as bad, but I only drink very little of it. And so the fact is that as I hardly eat and hardly drink I'm very weak, but my blood is improving instead of being ruined. So once again, it's patience I need in the circumstances, and perseverance.

Having received the absorbent canvas, I'm starting these days a new no. 30 canvas that I hope will be better than the others. Do you remember in *La recherche du bonheur* the chap who bought as much land as he could run round in a single day? Well, with my orchard decoration I've been that man, more or less, half a dozen out of a dozen I have anyway, but the other 6 aren't as good, and I'm sorry I didn't rather do 2 of them instead of the last 6. Anyway, I'll send you ten or so in the next few days anyway.

I bought 2 pairs of shoes, which cost me 26 francs, and 3 shirts that cost me 27 francs, which meant that despite the 100 note I wasn't enormously rich. But in view of the fact that I plan to do business in Marseille, I

definitely want to be well turned out, and I don't intend to buy anything but good quality. And the same for work, it will be better to do one painting fewer than to do it less well.

Should it come about that you had to leave those gentlemen, don't think that I have doubts about the possibility of doing business all the same, but we mustn't be caught unawares, that's all, and if it drags on a bit longer that's actually for the better.

As for me, if a few months from now I'm ready for an expedition to Marseille, I'll be able to do things with more self-assurance than if I arrived there having run out of breath. I've seen MacKnight again, but still nothing of his work. I still have colours, I have brushes, I still have plenty of things in stock. But we mustn't waste our powder.

I think if you were to leave those gentlemen, for my part I'd have to manage to live without spending more than, for example, 150 francs a month. I couldn't do it now, but you'll see that in 2 months I'll be set up like that. If then we earn more, so much the better, but I want to ensure that.

So, if I had some very strong broth, that would get me going right away, it's dreadful, I've *never* been able to get even any of the very simple things I've asked those people for. And it's the same everywhere in these little restaurants. Yet it's not hard to boil potatoes. Impossible.

And no rice or macaroni either, or else it's ruined with fat or they don't do it, and make the excuse: it's for tomorrow, there's no room on the stove, &c.

It's silly but true all the same that that's why my health is poor.

All the same, it cost me a lot of agonizing to bring myself to make a decision, because I said to myself that in The Hague and in Nuenen I'd tried to take a studio and I said to myself that it had turned out badly. But many things have changed since then, and as I feel I'm on firmer ground — let's go ahead. Only we've already spent so much money on this bloody painting we mustn't forget that it has to come back in paintings. If we dare believe, and I'm sure of it, that Impressionist paintings will go up in value, we've got to do lots of them and keep the prices up.

All the more reason why we should calmly take care of the quality of the thing and not waste time. And after a few years, I can see the possibility that the capital laid out will come back into our hands, if not in cash, then in value.

And now if you agree, I'll rent or buy furniture for the bedroom. I'll go and have a look today or tomorrow morning.

I'm still convinced that nature here is just what's needed to do colour. And so it's more than likely that I won't move far from here.

Raffaëlli has done a portrait of Edmond de Goncourt, hasn't he? That must be beautiful. I've seen *Le Salon* published by *L'Illustration*. Is the Jules Breton beautiful?

You'll soon receive a painting I did for you for the first of May.

If necessary, I could live at the new studio with someone else, and I'd very much like to. Perhaps Gauguin will come to the south. Perhaps I'll come to an arrangement with MacKnight. Then we could cook at home.

In any case, the studio is too open to view for me to think it could tempt any woman, and it would be hard for a petticoat episode to lead to a cohabitation. Anyway, moral standards seem to me less inhuman and contrary to nature than in Paris. But with my temperament, to lead a wild life and to work are no longer compatible at all, and in the given circumstances I'll have to content myself with making paintings. That's not happiness and not real life, but what can you say, even this artistic life, which we know isn't *the* real one, seems so alive to me, and it would be ungrateful not to be content with it.

I have one big worry fewer now that I've found the little white studio. I looked at a whole lot of apartments without success. It will seem funny to you that the water closet is at the neighbour's, in quite a large house that belongs to the same owner. In a southern town I think you'd be wrong to complain about it, because these facilities are few and far between, and dirty, and you can't help thinking of them as nests of germs.

On the other hand, I have water here.

I'll put some Japanese prints on the wall.

If there happened to be some canvases in your apartment that were in the way, this could always be used as a storeroom, that might become necessary, because you ought not to have mediocre things at your place.

Bernard has written to me and sent croquis.

I'm very pleased that you found our mother and sister well.

Is Reid going to Marseille? At the bottom of it, perhaps, is that he loves this woman who didn't trust us, feeling that we might perhaps not want to encourage the cohabitation. I'm inclined to believe she's the psychological reason for his coming back. You'll say that in that case we'll have to



consider everything he's going to do in the future, and maintain great composure for the moment. Will you go back to Holland for the holidays? If you could do both, going to see Tersteeg and Marseille on business regarding the Impressionists, and resting at Breda between those two chores.

Have you seen Seurat again?

I shake your hand firmly, wishing you a year as full of sunshine as the weather here today. Warm regards to Koning.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

If you could send me 100 francs next time, I could sleep at the studio as early as this week. I'll also write you what arrangement the furniture dealer wants to make.

## **Arles, on or about Sunday, 20 May 1888**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 611)

My dear Theo,

What you write about your visit to Gruby has upset me, but at the same time it reassures me that you went there.

Have you considered that your lethargy — a feeling of extreme lassitude — could have been caused by this heart condition, and that in that case potassium iodide couldn't be blamed for these periods of stupefied exhaustion? If you remember how stupefied I was myself this winter, to the point of being quite incapable! of doing anything whatsoever, apart from a little painting, although I wasn't taking potassium iodide at all. So if I were you, I'd have it out with Rivet if Gruby tells you not to take it.

And it will in any case — I have no doubt about it — be your intention to be friends with both the one and the other.

I often think of Gruby *here* and *now*, and in short I feel well, but it's because here I have the pure air and the heat, which make things more possible for me. Among all the trials and the bad air of Paris, Rivet takes things as they are without trying to create a paradise and without in the slightest way trying to make us perfect. But he forges a suit of armour, or



rather, he inures us to illness and keeps morale up, I find, by making fun of the trouble we have.

So if you could now have just one year of living in the country and close to nature, that would make Gruby's treatment much easier. So I think he'll urge you not to see women except in case of necessity, but as little as possible. Now for myself, I feel fine here in that respect, but *here*, since I have work and nature, and if I didn't have that I'd become melancholy. As long as work has some appeal for you over there, and the Impressionists are going well, that would be a great gain. Because loneliness, worries, vexations, the need for friendship and fellow-feeling not sufficiently met, that's what's very bad, the mental emotions of sadness or disappointments undermine us more than riotous living: us, that is, who find ourselves the happy owners of troubled hearts.

I think potassium iodide purifies the blood and the whole system, doesn't it — will you be able to do without it? Anyway, you'll have to have a straight talk about it with Rivet, who shouldn't be jealous.

I could wish you had near you something more rudely alive, warmer than the Dutch — but all the same, Koning with his whims is an exception for the better. Anyway, it's always good to have somebody. But I could still wish you had one or two good friends among the French. Would you do me a great favour: my friend the Dane, who leaves for Paris on Tuesday, will give you 2 small paintings — nothing much — that I'd like to give to Mme the Countess De la Boissière at Asnières. She stays in boulevard Voltaire, on the first floor of the first house at the end of the Clichy bridge. *Père* Perruchot's restaurant is on the ground floor. Would you take them to her personally on my behalf, saying I had hopes of seeing her again this spring and that even here I haven't forgotten her; I gave them 2 small ones last year as well, her and her daughter. I'd have hope that you wouldn't regret making these ladies' acquaintance. After all, they're *a family*. The countess is far from young but she's first of all a countess, then *a lady*, the daughter ditto.

And it makes sense for you to go, since I can't be sure that the family's staying in the same place this year (however, they've been coming there for several years, and Perruchot must know their address in town). Perhaps I'm deluding myself — but I can't help thinking of them, and perhaps it will be a pleasure for them and for you too, if you meet them.

Listen — I'll do all I can to send you some new drawings for Dordrecht.

This week I've done two still lifes.

[[sketch A](#)] A blue enamelled tin coffee-pot, a royal blue and gold cup (on the left), a pale blue and white chequered milk jug, a cup — on the right — white, with blue and orange designs, on a yellow grey earthenware plate, a blue barbotine or majolica jug with red, green, brown designs, and lastly 2 oranges and 3 lemons; the table is covered with a blue cloth, the background is yellow green, making 6 different blues and 4 or 5 yellows and oranges.

Et c'est logique que tu y ailles puisque moi  
 je ne puis être sûr que la famille reste  
 au même endroit cette année (cependant  
 elles y viennent depuis plusieurs années et  
 Perrichot doit connaître l'adresse en ville.)  
 C'est peut être une illusion que je me  
 fais mais - je ne puis m'empêcher  
 d'y penser et peut être cela leur fera plaisir  
 et à toi aussi si tu les connais.

Ecoutes - je ferai tout mon possible  
 de l'envoyer de nouveaux des/ins  
 pour Dordrecht  
 J'ai fait cette semaine deux natures  
 mortes.



une cafétière en faïence émaillée bleu une tasse (à gauche) bleu  
 de zoi et or un pot à lait carrelé bleu pale et blanc  
 une tasse - à droite blanche des/ins bleu orange sur  
 une assiette de terre jaune gris un pot en barbotine  
 en majolique bleu avec des/ins rouges verts bruns  
 enfin 2 oranges et 3 citrons la table est couverte  
 d'une draperie bleue le fond est jaune vert  
 donc 6 bleus différents et 4 ou 5 jaunes & oranges  
 L'autre nature morte est le pot de majolique avec des  
 fleurs sauvages

The other still life is the majolica jug with wild flowers.

I thank you very much for your letter and for the 50-franc note. I hope the crate will reach you in the next few days. The next time I think I'll take the canvases off the stretching frames and send them rolled, by fast service. I think you'll soon make friends with this Dane — he doesn't do much but — he has intelligence and a good heart, and he probably started painting not long ago. Take him out a bit one Sunday to get to know him.

For myself, I feel infinitely better, my blood is circulating well, and my stomach's digesting. I've found very, very good food now, which had an immediate effect on me.

Have you seen Gruby's face when he pinches his lips tight and says 'No women'? It would make a really good Degas, that face, like that. But there's nothing to be said against it, because when you have to work all day long with your brain, calculating, thinking, planning business, that's quite enough in itself for your nerves. So go off now and visit women in the world of artists and suchlike, you'll see you'll succeed — really. You'll see it'll work out like that and you won't lose much, will you?

I still haven't been able to make a deal with the furniture dealer, I've seen a bed but it's dearer than I thought. I feel the need to get more work done before spending more on furniture.

My lodgings cost me 1 franc a night. I've bought more linen and colours as well.

I've bought some very strong linen.

Just as my blood is returning to normal, so the idea of succeeding is returning to me too. I shouldn't be too surprised if your illness was also a reaction to this dreadful winter, which lasted an age. And then it will go the same way as with me; take as much spring air as possible, go to bed *very early* because you'll need to sleep; and then food, lots of fresh vegetables and no *bad* wine or *bad* liquor. And very few women and A GREAT DEAL OF PATIENCE. If it doesn't clear up at once that doesn't matter. And now Gruby will give you a heavy meat diet over there. Here, for myself, I couldn't take very much, and it's not necessary here. It's just my stupefaction that's going away, I don't feel as much need to amuse myself, I'm less at the mercy of my passions and I can work more calmly, I could be alone without being bored. I came out of it feeling a little older, but no sadder.

I wouldn't believe you if in your next letter you told me there was nothing wrong with you any more; it's perhaps a more serious change and I shouldn't be surprised if, during the time it will take you to recover, you had some dejection. There is and there remains and it always comes back at times, in the midst of the artistic life, a yearning for — real life — ideal and not attainable.

And we sometimes lack the desire to throw ourselves head first into art again and to build ourselves up for that. We know we're cab-horses and that it'll be the same cab we're going to be harnessed to again. And so we don't feel like doing it and we'd prefer to live in a meadow with a sun, a river, the company of other horses who are also free, and the act of generation. And perhaps in the final account your heart condition comes partly from there; it wouldn't greatly surprise me. We no longer rebel against things, we're not resigned either — we're ill and it's not going to get any better — and we can't do anything specific about it. I don't know who called this condition being struck by death and immortality. The cab we drag along must be of use to people we don't know. But you see, if we believe in the new art, in the artists of the future, our presentiment doesn't deceive us. When good *père* Corot said a few days before he died: last night I saw in my dreams landscapes with entirely pink skies, well, didn't they come, those pink skies, and yellow and green into the bargain, in Impressionist landscapes? All this is to say there are things one senses in the future and that really come about.

And we, who, I'm inclined to believe, are by no means so close to dying, nevertheless feel the thing is bigger than us and longer-lasting than our lives.

We don't feel we're dying, but we feel the reality of the fact that we're not much, and that to be a link in the chain of artists we pay a steep price in health, youth, freedom, which we don't enjoy at all, any more than the cab-horse that pulls a carriage full of people who, unlike him, are going out to enjoy the springtime. Well then — what I wish you as well as myself is to succeed in recovering our health, because we'll need it. That Hope of Puvis de Chavannes is such a reality. There's an art in the future and it will surely be so beautiful and so young that, really, if at present we leave it our own youth, we can only gain in tranquillity. Perhaps it's too silly to write all this, but it's what I felt; it seemed that like me, you suffered to see your youth going up in — smoke — but if it comes back and appears in what we do, there's nothing lost, and the power to work is a second youth. So be serious



about getting better, because we'll need our health. I shake your hand firmly, and Koning's too.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **Arles, on or about Tuesday, 5 June 1888**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 620)

My dear Theo,

Many thanks for your kind letter and the 50-franc note that was enclosed with it.

We'll still have to write to Gauguin. The problem is this bloody journey, since we urge him to make it, and afterwards we'd be in an awkward position if it doesn't suit him. *I think I'll write to him today and will send you the letter.*

Now that I've seen the sea here I really feel the importance there is in staying in the south and feeling — if the colour has to be even more exaggerated — Africa not far away from one.

I'm sending you by same post some drawings of Saintes-Maries. I did the drawing of the boats as I was leaving, very early in the morning, and I'm working on the painting, a no. 30 canvas with more sea and sky on the right.

It was before the boats cleared off; I'd watched it all the other mornings, but as they leave very early, hadn't had time to do it.

I have another 3 drawings of huts that I still need and which will follow; these ones of the huts are a bit harsh, but I have some more carefully drawn ones. I'll make you a consignment of rolled-up paintings as soon as the seascapes are dry.

Do you see the cheek of these idiots in Dordrecht, do you see that self-importance, they're very happy to condescend to Degas and Pissarro — of whose work they've seen nothing, by the way, any more than of the others.

But it's a very good sign that the young ones are furious, perhaps it proves that there are some old ones who've spoken well of it.

About staying in the south, even if it's more expensive — Look, we love Japanese painting, we've experienced its influence — all the

Impressionists have that in common — and we wouldn't go to Japan, in other words, to what is the equivalent of Japan, the south? So I believe that the future of the new art still lies in the south after all.

But it's bad policy to live there alone when two or three could help each other to live on little.

I'd like you to spend some time here, you'd feel it — after some time your vision changes, you see with a more Japanese eye, you feel colour differently. I'm also convinced that it's precisely through a long stay here that I'll bring out my personality. The Japanese draws quickly, very quickly, like a flash of lightning, because his nerves are finer, his feeling simpler. I've been here only a few months but — tell me, in Paris would I have drawn *in an hour* the drawing of the boats? Not even with the frame. Now this was done without measuring, letting the pen go. So I tell myself that gradually the expenses will be balanced by work. I'd like us to earn a lot of money to bring good artists here who too often get despondent in the mud on the Petit Boulevard. Fortunately it's extremely easy to sell the right sort of paintings in the right sort of place to the right sort of gentleman. Since the distinguished Albert gave us the formula, all our difficulties have disappeared by magic. You only have to go down rue de la Paix — there strolls, just for that purpose — the good art lover.

If Gauguin came here, he and I could perhaps accompany Bernard to Africa when he goes there to do his service.

What have you decided about our two sisters?

Anquetin and Lautrec — I think — won't like what I'm doing. Apparently an article on Anquetin has appeared in the *Revue Indépendante* in which he seems to have been called the leader of a new movement in which Japonism was even more marked, &c. I haven't read it, but after all — the leader of the Petit Boulevard is without any doubt Seurat, and young Bernard has perhaps gone further than Anquetin in the Japanese style. Tell them I have a painting of boats, that and the Langlois bridge could suit Anquetin. What Pissarro says is true — the effects colours produce through their harmonies or discords should be boldly exaggerated. It's the same as in drawing — the precise drawing, the right colour — is not perhaps the essential element we should look for — because the reflection of reality in the mirror, if it was possible to fix it with colour and everything — would in no way be a painting, any more than a photograph.

More soon, handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## Arles, on or about Thursday, 7 June 1888

To Emile Bernard (letter 622)

My dear old Bernard,

More and more it seems to me that the paintings that *ought to be made*, the paintings that are necessary, indispensable for painting today to be fully itself and to rise to a level equivalent to the serene peaks achieved by the Greek sculptors, the German musicians, the French writers of novels, exceed the power of an isolated individual, and will therefore probably be created by groups of men combining to carry out a shared idea.

One has a superb orchestration of colours and lacks ideas.

The other overflows with new, harrowing or charming conceptions, but is unable to express them in a way that's sufficiently sonorous, given the timidity of a limited palette.

Very good reason to regret the lack of an esprit de corps among artists, who criticize each other, persecute each other, while fortunately not succeeding in cancelling each other out.

You'll say that this whole argument is a banality. So be it — but the thing itself — the existence of a Renaissance — that fact is certainly not a banality.

A technical question. Do give me your opinion in next letter.

I'm going to put the *black* and the *white* boldly on my palette just the way the colourman sells them to us, and use them as they are.

When — and note that I'm talking about the simplification of colour in the Japanese manner — when I see in a green park with pink paths a gentleman who's dressed in black, and a justice of the peace by profession (the Arab Jew in Daudet's *Tartarin* calls this honourable official shustish of the beace), who's reading *L'Intransigeant*.

Above him and the park a sky of a simple cobalt.

Then why not paint the said shustish of the beace with simple bone black and *L'Intransigeant* with simple, very harsh white?

Because the Japanese disregards reflection, placing his solid tints one beside the other — characteristic lines naively marking off movements or shapes.

In another category of ideas, when you compose a colour motif expressing, for example, a yellow evening sky —

The harsh, hard white of a white wall against the sky can be expressed, at a pinch and in a strange way, by harsh white and by that same white softened by a neutral tone. Because the sky itself colours it with a delicate lilac hue. [[sketch A](#)] Again, in this very naive landscape, which is meant to show us a hut, whitewashed overall (the roof, too), situated in an orange field, of course, because the sky in the south and the blue Mediterranean produce an orange that is all the more intense the higher in tint the range of blues —

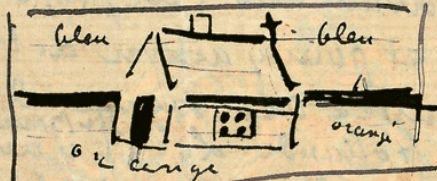
The black note of the door, of the window panes, of the little cross on the rooftop, creates a simultaneous contrast of white and black [[sketch B](#)] just as pleasing to the eye as that of the blue with the orange.



le blanc cru et dur d'un mur blanc  
 contre le ciel à l'arrière s'exprime  
 et d'une façon étrange par le blanc cru  
 et ce même blanc rabattu par un ton  
~~très~~ neutre car le ciel même le colore  
 d'un ton lilas ~~très~~ ~~propre~~

blanchie entièrement  
 à la chaux (le ciel aussi)  
 posée sur un terrain  
 orangei c'est-à-dire  
 le ciel du midi  
 et la méditerranée

Encore dans ce  
 paysage si naïf  
 lequel est sensé nous  
 représenter une cabane



bleu ~~non~~ provoquent un orangei d'autant plus intense  
 que la gamme des bleus est plus montée de ton

la note noire de la porte des vitres de la petite croix  
 de blanc & noir  
 sur la toile tout qu'il y a un contraste simultané

agréable  
 à l'œil  
 car tout  
 autant que  
 celui du  
 bleu avec  
 l'orange -  
 pour prendre  
 un mot plus  
 amusant  
 & amusant



une femme habillée  
 d'une robe carrée  
 noir & blanc dans  
 le même paysage  
 primitif d'un ciel  
 bleu & d'une terre  
 orangee. ce serait  
 assez drôle à voir  
 je m'imagine  
 justement à l'air on  
 porte souvent du carré  
 blanc & noir.

Suffit que le noir et le blanc sont des couleurs  
 aussi. ~~car sans se~~ plutôt dans des cas peuvent  
 être considérés comme couleurs car leur contraste  
 simultané est aussi piquant que celui du  
 vert & du rouge par exemple.

la partie encadrée seulement



To take a more entertaining subject, let's imagine a woman dressed in a black and white checked dress, in the same primitive landscape of a blue sky and an orange earth — that would be quite amusing to see, I imagine. In fact, in Arles they often do wear white and black checks.

In short, black and white are colours too, or rather, in many cases may be considered colours, since their simultaneous contrast is as sharp as that of green and red, for example.

The Japanese use it too, by the way — they express a young girl's matt and pale complexion, and its sharp contrast with her black hair wonderfully well with white paper and 4 strokes of the pen. Not to mention their black thorn-bushes, studded with a thousand white flowers.

I've finally seen the Mediterranean, which you'll probably cross before me. Spent a week in Saintes-Maries, and to get there crossed the Camargue in a diligence, with vineyards, heaths, fields as flat as Holland. There, at Saintes-Maries, there were girls who made one think of Cimabue and Giotto: slim, straight, a little sad and mystical. On the completely flat, sandy beach, little green, red, blue boats, so pretty in shape and colour that one thought of flowers; one man boards them, these boats hardly go on the high sea — they dash off when there's no wind and come back to land if there's a bit too much. It appears that Gauguin is still ill. I'm quite curious to know what you've done lately; I'm still doing landscapes, croquis enclosed. I'd very much like to see Africa too, but I hardly make any firm plans for the future, it will depend on circumstances. What I'd like to know is the effect of a more intense blue in the sky. Fromentin and Gérôme see the earth in the south as colourless, and a whole lot of people saw it that way. My God, yes, if you take dry sand in your hand and if you look at it closely. Water, too, air, too, considered this way, are colourless. NO BLUE WITHOUT YELLOW and WITHOUT ORANGE, and if you do blue, then do yellow and orange as well, surely. Ah well, you'll tell me that I write you nothing but banalities. Handshake in thought.

Ever yours,

Vincent

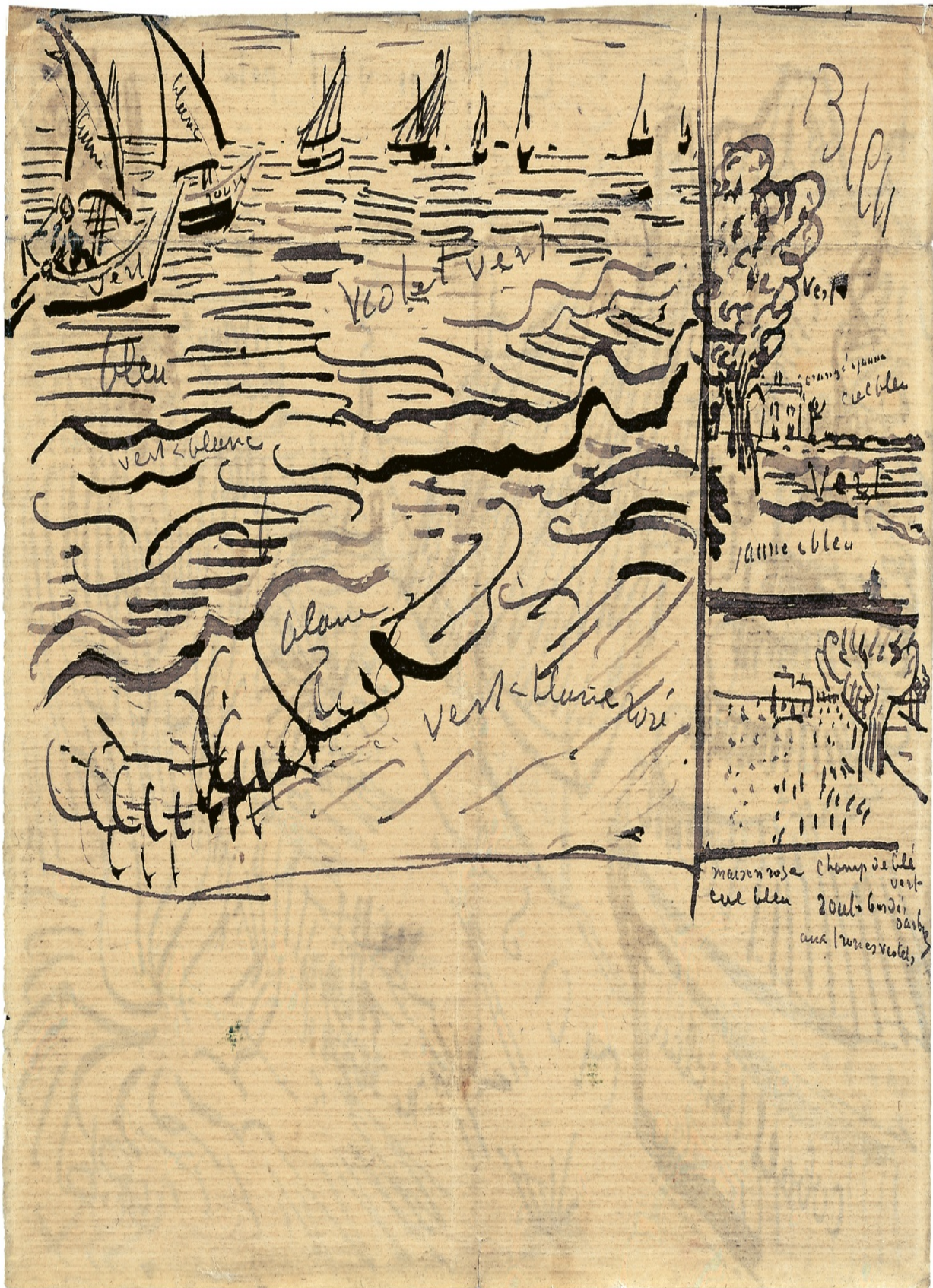
[[sketches C–H](#)]





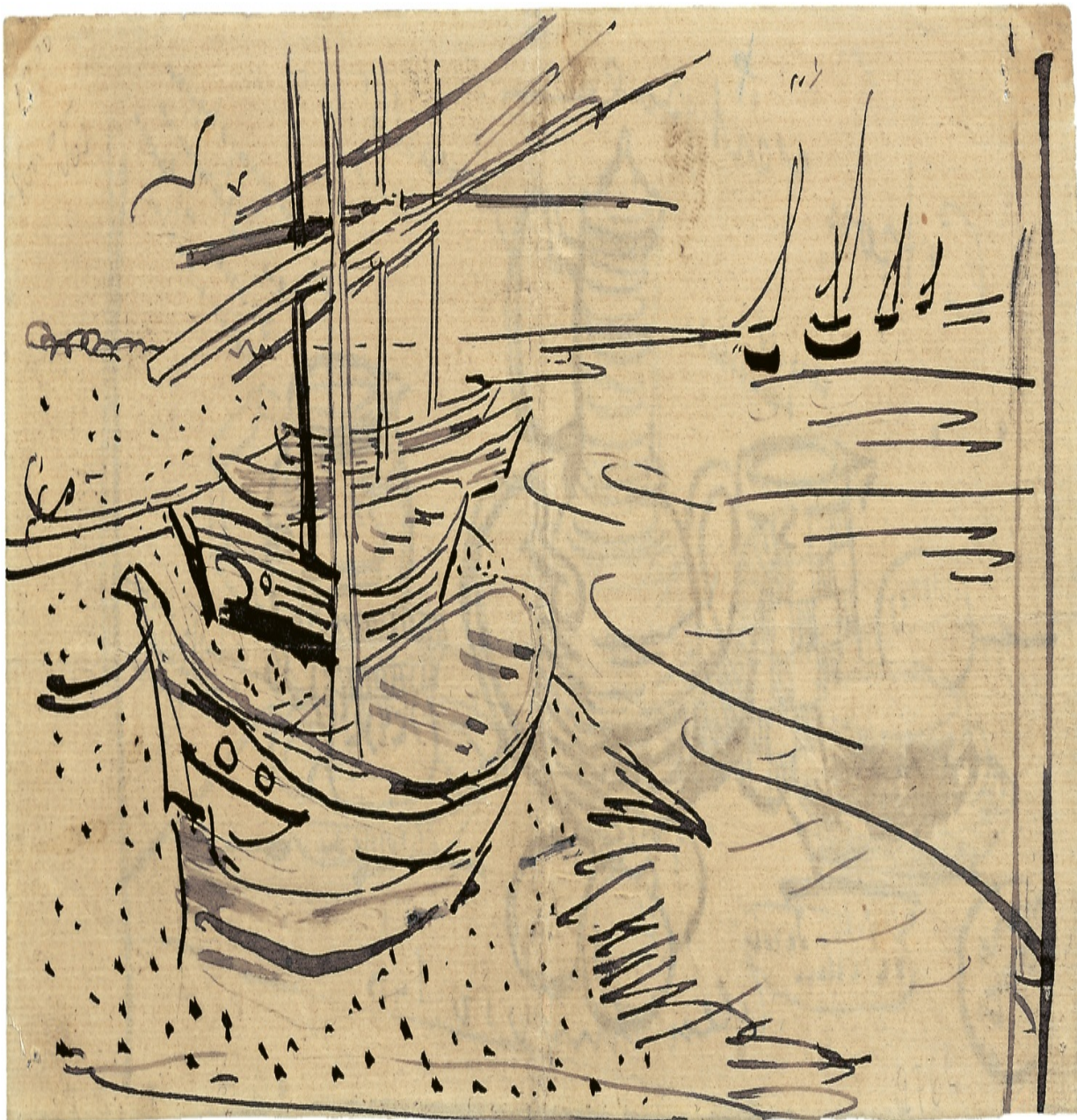
622C. *Row of cottages in Saintes-Maries*





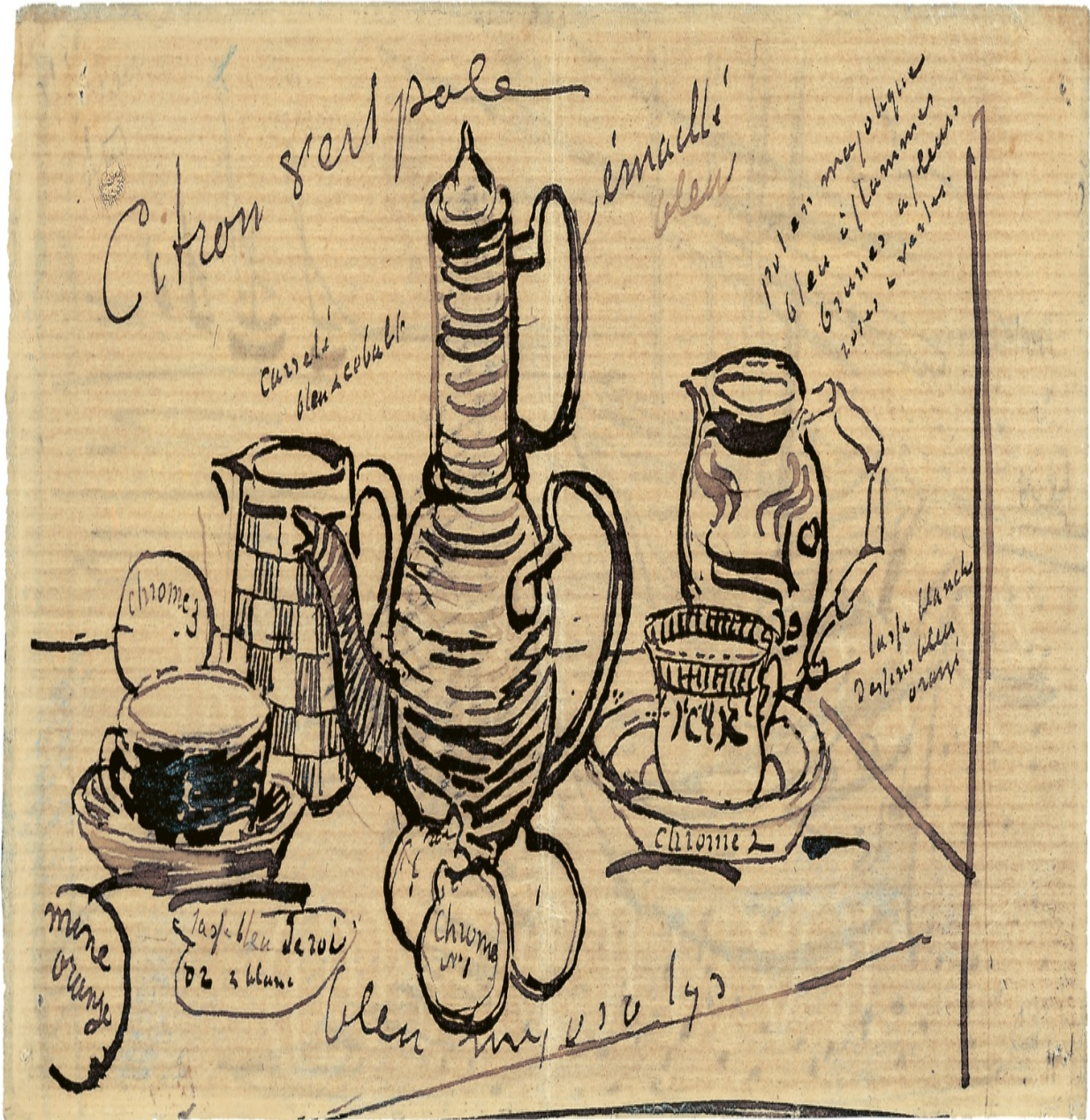


622D–F. *Fishing boats at sea; Landscape with the edge of a road; Farmhouse in a wheatfield*



622G. *Fishing boats on the beach at Saintes-Maries*





622H. Still life with coffee pot

**Arles, between Saturday, 16 and Wednesday, 20  
June 1888**

To Willemien van Gogh (letter 626)

My dear sister,

Many thanks for your letter, which I'd been looking forward to; I daren't give way to my desire to write to you often or to encourage this on your part. All this correspondence doesn't always help to keep us, who are of a nervous disposition, strong in cases of possible immersions in melancholy of the kind you refer to in your letter and which I myself have too every now and then. A friend of mine asserted that the best treatment for all ills is to treat them with the most profound contempt.

The remedy for the immersions you refer to doesn't, as far as I know, grow among the usual medicinal herbs. Nonetheless I drink large quantities of bad coffee in such cases, not because this is very good for already bad teeth but because my strong powers of imagination in this respect enable me to have a religious faith — worthy of an idolater, Christian or anthropophagus — in the cheering effect of the aforementioned fluid. Fortunately for my fellow creatures I have so far carefully refrained from recommending this or similar remedies to them as being efficacious. The sun here, *that* is something else, and if for a while one just drinks wine that at least in part has been pressed from grapes. I assure you that the people in our country are as blind as moles and criminally stupid because they don't make more effort to go to the Indies or somewhere else where the sun shines. It's not good to know only one thing; it stultifies one. One shouldn't rest until one also knows the opposite.

What you say about extenuating circumstances, that sadly they don't take away the fact of having done something wrong or spoiled something, is very true.

Well, just think of our national history, rise and fall of the Dutch republic, and you'll understand what I mean, we mustn't give way too much to the extenuating circumstance of not being able &c., it's less Christian (in the sense in which people water it down these days), but it's better for us and perhaps even for others. And energy generates energy, and conversely paralysis paralyzes others.

We're now living here in a world of painting where it's unspeakably paralyzed and wretched. The exhibitions, the shops for paintings, everything, everything is occupied by people who all intercept money. And you mustn't think that I'm imagining this. People pay a lot for the work when the painter himself is dead. And people always disparage living painters by pointing unanswerably to the work of those who are no longer with us.

I know that we can't do anything to change this. For the sake of peace one must therefore resign oneself to it, or have some sort of patronage or captivate a rich woman or something, otherwise one can't work. Everything one hopes for in terms of independence through one's work, of influence on others, absolutely nothing comes of it.

And yet it's something of a pleasure to make a painting, and yet there are 20 or so painters here right now, all of them having more debts than money &c., all of them with a way of life something like that of curs, who will perhaps mean more than the whole official exhibition in so far as the future manner of working is concerned.

The principal characteristic of a painter, I imagine, is *to paint really well*; those who can paint, those who can do it best, are the germs of something that will continue to exist for a long time, just as long as there are eyes that enjoy something that is singularly beautiful.

Well I constantly regret that one can't make oneself richer by working harder — on the contrary.

If one actually could do that, one would be able to accomplish much more, be able to associate with others, and what not. For now everyone is bound by his opportunity to earn his living, and one is far from free, exactly.

You talk about 'whether I had submitted something to Arti' — certainly not — only Theo sent Mr Tersteeg a consignment of paintings by Impressionists and there was one of mine in it. However, all that transpired was that neither Tersteeg nor the artists, so Theo heard, had found anything in it.

Well that's very understandable because it's always the same, people have heard of the Impressionists, they have great expectations of them... and when they see them for the first time they're bitterly, bitterly disappointed and find them careless, ugly, badly painted, badly drawn, bad in colour, everything that's miserable. That was my first impression, too, when I came to Paris with the ideas of Mauve and Israëls and other clever painters. And when there's an exhibition in Paris of Impressionists alone, I believe a host of visitors come back from it bitterly disappointed and even indignant, in just the same mood as the good Hollanders were at the time when, coming out of church, they attended a lecture by Domela Nieuwenhuis or other socialists a moment later.

And yet — you know — in the space of 10 or 15 years that whole edifice of a national religion fell and — the socialists are still there and will

be there for a long time, although neither you nor I belong very much to either persuasion.

Well art — official art — and its education, management, organization, is as stultified and mouldering as the religion we see falling — and it won't last, however many exhibitions, studios, schools &c. there may be, won't last any more than tulip mania.

But this doesn't concern us, we're neither founders of something new nor called upon to be preservers of something old.

But this remains — a painter is someone who paints, just as a genuine flower lover is someone who loves plants and grows them himself, and *not* the tulip dealer.

And so those 20 or so painters whom people call Impressionists, although a few of them have become fairly rich and fairly big men in the world — all the same, the majority of them are poor souls who live in coffee houses, lodge in cheap inns, live from one day to the next.

But — in one day all those 20 whom I mentioned to you paint everything they set eyes on, and better than many a great man who has a big reputation in the art world.

I say this to get you to understand what sort of tie binds me to the French painters whom people call the Impressionists — that I know many of them personally and like them.

And furthermore that in my own technique I have the same ideas concerning colour, which even I was thinking about when I was still in Holland.

Cornflowers with white chrysanthemums and a few marigolds. There you have a motif in blue and orange.

Heliotrope and yellow roses, motif in lilac and yellow.

Poppies or red geraniums in bold green leaves, motif in red and green.

There you have *basics* that one can subdivide further, can elaborate, but enough to show you without a painting that there are colours that make each other shine, that make a *couple*, complete each other like man and wife.

Explaining the whole theory to you would take quite a lot of writing, but still, it could be done.

Clothes, wallpaper, what couldn't one make a good deal nicer by taking account of the laws of colour.

You understand that Israëls and Mauve, who didn't use whole colours, who always worked in grey, do not, with the greatest respect and love,

satisfy the present-day longing for colour.

Something else: someone who can really play the violin or piano is, it seems to me, a mightily entertaining person. He picks up his violin and starts to play, and a whole gathering enjoys it all evening long. A painter has to be able to do that too.

And this sometimes gives me pleasure, to work outside when someone's looking on. One is in the wheat, say. Well then, in the space of a few hours one has to be able to paint that wheatfield and the sky above it and the prospect in the distance. Anyone who watches that will certainly keep his mouth shut afterwards about the clumsiness of the Impressionists and their bad painting, you see. But nowadays we seldom have acquaintances who are interested enough to come along now and again. But when they do, then they're sometimes won over for good.

Now contrast that with the fellows who need a studio, months and months, and I don't know what else to make something — only too often rather dull, after all that.

Can't you understand then that there's something in the new manner? And I also want this — I want to be able to paint a portrait in a morning or an afternoon, and I've done that now and again, as a matter of fact.

This work definitely doesn't alter the fact that one can work longer on other paintings. Yesterday I sent you by post a drawing that's the first scratch for quite a large painting.

But isn't it curious that, as I said to you just then, there are at least a score of fellows who in an hour or so can paint a portrait with character in it — people hardly ever ask for one — 20 or so fellows who can do whatever landscape you please, at whatever hour of the day, with whatever colour effect you please, on the spot, without hesitation — nobody looks on, they always work alone. If only everyone knew this, though — but you see the circumstances are so little known. Only I imagine that a generation later or in one of the later generations — this working decisively without hesitation, measuring correctly in an instant, skilful mixing of the colour, drawing at lightning speed — a generation will come that will do this not as we do now, alone, unloved, but with a public that will like it both for portraits of people and for portraits of landscapes or interiors.

However, I'm writing to you much too much about painting, only by doing so I wanted to get you to understand that it's rather important that Theo has got things to the point that in the firm he manages there's always



an exhibition of Impressionists nowadays. Next year will be rather important. Just as the French are undeniably the masters in literature, so it is in painting too, in modern art history there are names like Delacroix, Millet, Corot, Courbet, Daumier, who dominate everything that was produced in other countries. Yet the clique of painters who currently stand at the head of the official art world is resting on the laurels won by those earlier men, and is in itself of much lesser calibre. So *they* can't do much at the forthcoming World Exhibition to help French art retain that importance it's had until now. Next year the attention, not of the public — who naturally look at everything without wondering about the history — but the attention of those who are well informed, will be attracted by the retrospective exhibition of the paintings of the great men who are already dead, and by the Impressionists. Even that won't immediately change the circumstances in which the latter find themselves, but it will at least help to disseminate the ideas and generate a bit more enthusiasm. The dull schoolmasters who are now on the selection committee for the Salon won't even admit the Impressionists though. The latter won't want that anyway, though, and will exhibit on their own. When you realize that I want to have at least 50 or so paintings by then, you'll perhaps see that I, who don't exhibit, will nevertheless slowly and steadily play my part in a battle of which one can at least say this, that if one takes part in it, one doesn't have to fear a *prize* or medal like a good boy. They're ambitious here too, but still there's a difference, and many here are beginning to understand how ridiculous it is to make oneself dependent on the opinion of others about what one does. I detest writing about myself and I don't know why I do it. Perhaps to give you answers to your questions. You see what I've found, my work, and you also see what I haven't found, everything else that's part of life. And the future? Either become wholly abstracted from whatever isn't the work or... I dare not elaborate on that 'or' because becoming nothing but a work machine, unfit for and indifferent to all the rest, could be either better or worse than that average. I could quite easily resign myself to that average, and for the time being the fact is I'm still in exactly the same junk heap as ever.

By the way, talking of junk. It might still be worth while salvaging anything any good from the junk of mine which, so Theo says, is still somewhere in an attic in Breda, but I daren't ask it of you and perhaps it's been lost, so don't worry about it.

But this is the question. You know Theo brought a whole batch of woodcuts with him last year? Even so, a few of the best portfolios are missing and the rest isn't as good precisely because it's no longer complete. Obviously woodcuts from illustrated magazines get rarer and rarer as the volumes get older. Enough, this junk doesn't leave me completely indifferent; for instance, there's a copy of Gavarni's *Mascarade humaine*, a book *Anatomy for artists*, in short, a few things that are actually much too good to lose. I consider them as lost in advance, though; anything that still turns up is pure gain. I didn't know when I left that it would be for good like this. Because the work wasn't going badly in Nuenen and it was only a matter of going on with it. *I still miss* my models who were made for me and whom I still adore; if only I had them here now — I'm sure my 50 paintings would hit the mark. Do you understand that I'm not angry with the human race because they think I'm this or that — I freely admit in advance that they're absolutely right, but it saddens me that I don't have enough power to get what I want to pose for me, where I want and for as long or as short as I want. The problem I have to bring to an end, to overcome, lies *there* and not in the technical difficulty. And today I'm a landscape painter whereas I'm actually more suited to portraits. So it wouldn't surprise me much if I were to change style again sometime. A painter — Chaplin — who paints the portraits of the most beautiful women in Paris mightily well, ladies in boudoirs dressed or undressed, has painted powerful landscapes and herds of pigs on the moors. What I'm saying is one has to do what lies to hand and hold fast to one's technique.

If you were within my reach you would, I fear, have to get down to painting. There are Parisian ladies among the Impressionists, at least one really good — even 2 good ones.

And when I think how the new manner could help to put the women who are *incapable* of precision, who feel musically, on the right track, then I sometimes regret getting older and uglier than is in my interest.

It's very good of Theo to have invited you to come to Paris — I don't know what sort of impression it would make on you. The first time I saw it I felt above all the miseries that one cannot wave away, any more than the smell of sickness in the hospital, however clean it may be kept. And that stayed with me later, but later I gained an understanding of how it's a hotbed of ideas, and how the people try to get everything out of life that could possibly be in it. Other cities shrink by comparison, and it seems as big as

the sea. But one always leaves a whole piece of life behind there. And this is certain, *nothing is fresh there*. That's why, when one comes from there, one finds a mass of things elsewhere excellent.

I'm very glad that you've recovered your health; one does everything unwittingly and wrongly, without understanding it oneself, when one's ill.

You would *not, I think*, find the sun here unpleasant at all; I feel fine working outside in the hottest part of the day. It's a dry, clean heat.

The colour here is actually very fine; when the vegetation is fresh it's a rich green the like of which we seldom see in the north, calm. When it gets scorched and dusty it doesn't become ugly, but then a landscape takes on tones of gold of every shade, green-gold, yellow-gold, red-gold, ditto bronze, copper, in short from lemon yellow to the dull yellow colour of, say, a pile of threshed grain. That with the blue — from the deepest royal blue in the water to that of forget-me-nots. Cobalt above all, bright clear blue — green-blue and violet-blue.

Naturally this induces orange — a face tanned by the sun *looks* orange; further, because of all the yellow, the violet really speaks — a wicker fence or grey thatched roof or a ploughed field look much more violet than at home. Further, as you already suspect, the people here are often handsome. In a word, I believe that life here is rather more rewarding than in many other places. Only it seems to me that the people are getting a little slack here, slipping a little too much onto the downward slope of carelessness, indifference, whereas if they were more energetic the land would probably yield more. I haven't read much lately, except *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti.

Also L'abbé Constantin by Ohnet, terribly sweet and heavenly, so that even his Maître de forges, already tending that way, becomes even more suspect. Sometimes, out of ravenous hunger, I even read the newspaper here with fury, but don't take this to mean that I have a need to read. On the contrary, in fact, because I prefer to look at things myself. But it's simply become a habit to read for a few hours in the evening, so one can't help feeling that one's missing something, but you can tell that this isn't irksome from the fact that what one sees is interesting. I spent a week by the Mediterranean, you would think it beautiful. What strikes me here and what makes painting here attractive to me is the clarity of the air, you *can't* know what that is because it's precisely what we don't have at home — but at an hour's distance one can make out the colour of things, the grey-green of

olive trees and the grass green of the meadow, for instance, and the pink-lilac of ploughed land; at home we see a vague grey line on the horizon; here the line is sharp and the shape recognizable from far, far away. This gives an idea of space and air.

Since I'm now so occupied with myself, I'd also like to see if I can't make my own portrait in writing. First I start by saying that to my mind the same person supplies material for very diverse portraits.

Here's an impression of mine, which is the result of a portrait that I painted in the mirror, and which Theo has: a pink-grey face with green eyes, ash-coloured hair, wrinkles in forehead and around the mouth, stiffly wooden, a very red beard, quite unkempt and sad, but the lips are full, a blue smock of coarse linen, and a palette with lemon yellow, vermilion, Veronese green, cobalt blue, in short all the colours, except of the orange beard, on the palette, the only whole colours, though. The figure against a grey-white wall. You'll say that this is something like, say, the face of — death — in Van Eeden's book or some such thing — very well, but anyway isn't a figure like this — and it isn't easy to paint oneself — in any event *something different* from a photograph? And you see — this is what Impressionism has — to my mind — over the rest, it isn't banal, and one seeks a deeper likeness than that of the photographer.

I look different nowadays, in so far as I no longer have either hair or beard, both being always shaved off close; further, my complexion has changed from green-grey pink to grey-orange, and I have a white suit instead of a blue one, and am always dusty, always more laden like a porcupine with sticks, easel, canvas, and other merchandise. Only the green eyes have remained the same, but another colour in the portrait, naturally, is a yellow straw hat like a grass-mower — and a very black pipe. I live in a little yellow house with green door and shutters, whitewashed inside — on the white walls — very brightly coloured Japanese drawings — red tiles on the floor — the house in the full sun — and a bright blue sky above it and — the shadow in the middle of the day much shorter than at home. Anyway — but can't you understand that one can paint something like that with a few strokes, but at the same time can't you understand that some people say 'it looks too strange', not to mention the ones who find it nothing or abominable? If it just looks like it, but looks different from the work of the pious photographer with his black shadows — it should be done for that reason alone. I really don't like Mr Vosmaer at all, and am callous enough

not to care much about the man's exchange of the temporary for the eternal. It's a very good thing that you and Ma have acquired a garden, with cats, tomcats, sparrows and flies, rather than have an extra flight of stairs. I could never get used to climbing the stairs in Paris, and was always dizzy in a dreadful nightmare that has left me here, but recurred regularly there.

Were I not to put this letter in the post I would certainly tear it up if I read it over first — so I won't read it over and I doubt the legibility, I don't always have time to write.

I don't think there's anything in this letter and can't understand how I managed to make it so long. Thank Ma for her letter.

A long time ago I meant you to have a painted study, and you shall get it. I'm afraid that by post, even if I pay the postage, they'll make you pay excess postage, like the flowers from Menton, and this is even bigger — but Theo will certainly send you one, if I don't think about it, ask him for it.

Embracing you and Ma in thought.

Your loving  
Vincent

Theo works for all the Impressionists, he's done something for and sold for all of them, and will certainly go on doing so. But just these few things that I write to you about the matter will show you how he's something very different from the run of dealers, who care nothing for the painters.

*Was there enough postage on the drawing?* Write and tell me that, because I ought to know.

## **Arles, on or about Tuesday, 19 June 1888**

To Emile Bernard (letter 628)

My dear Bernard,

Forgive me if I write in great haste; I fear that my letter won't be at all legible, but I want to reply to you right away.

Do you know that we've been very foolish, Gauguin, you and I, in not all going to the same place? But when Gauguin left, I wasn't yet sure of being able to leave. And when you left, there was that dreadful money for



the fare, and the bad news I had to give about the expenses here, which prevented it. If we'd all left for here together it wouldn't have been so foolish, because the three of us would have done our own housekeeping. And now that I've found my bearings a little more, I'm beginning to see the advantages here. For myself, I'm in better health here than in the north — I even work in the wheatfields at midday, in the full heat of the sun, without any shade whatever, and there you are, I revel in it like a cicada. My God, if only I'd known this country at 25, instead of coming here at 35 — in those days I was enthusiastic about grey, or rather, absence of colour. I was always dreaming about Millet, and then I had acquaintances in Holland in the category of painters like Mauve, Israëls.

[[sketch A](#)] Here's croquis of a sower.

Mon cher Bernard Pardonne moi si j'écris bien à la hâte, je crains  
 que ma lettre ne sera point lisible mais je veux te répondre tout de suite.  
 Sais-tu que nous avons été très bêtes Gauguin lui et moi de ne pas  
 aller dans un même endroit. Mais lorsque Gauguin est parti moi  
 j'étais pas encore sûr de pouvoir partir. Et lorsque lui tu es parti  
 il y avait cet affreux argent du voyage et les mauvaises nouvelles  
 que j'avais à donner des/par ici qui l'ont empêché. Si nous étions  
 parti tous ensemble vers ici ce n'aurait pas été si bête car à bras  
 nous eussions fait le ménage chez nous. Et maintenant que je suis  
 un peu mieux orienté je commence à entrevoir des avantages ici.  
 Pour moi je me porte mieux ici qu'en dans le nord. Je travaille même en  
 plein midi en plein soleil sans ombre aucune dans les champs de blé et  
 orléans j'en jouis comme une cigale. Mon âge de 25 ans  
 j'en suis sûr ce pays est bien d'y venir à 35 à cette époque  
 j'étais enthousiasmé pour le gris ou l'encore plutôt ~~noir et blanc~~  
 le vert les couleurs de millet et puis j'avais des connaissances en Hollande  
 dans la catégorie de peintres maîtres j'étais à l'école.

Voici croquis d'un  
 sèmeur.  
 Grand terrain de molles  
 de terre labourés  
 franchement violet et  
 grande partie  
 champs de blé mûr d'un  
 bon d'ore jaune avec un  
 peu de carmin  
 le ciel jaune de chrome  
 presque aussi clair que  
 le soleil lui-même qui  
 est jaune de chrome avec  
 un peu de blanc l'air que  
 le rest du ciel est jaune  
 de chrome 1 et 2 mélangés  
 très jaune donc  
 le blanc du sèmeur est  
 et son pantalon blanc  
 tout de 27 carrie.



il y a bien des rappels de jaune dans le terrain  
 des lons neules résultantes du mélange de violet avec le jaune mais  
 je me suis un peu louché de la vérité de la couleur. J'ai des images naïves  
 d'almanach plutôt de vieil almanach de campagne ou la grêle  
 la neige la pluie le beau temps sont représentés d'une façon tout à fait  
 primitive. ainsi qu'Anquetin avait si bien trouvé sa méthode  
 je ne le cache pas que je ne déteste pas la campagne - y ayant été  
 élevé des bouffées de souvenirs d'autrefois des aspirations vers cet infini  
 dont le sèmeur la gerbe sont les symboles m'enchante encore comme  
 autrefois.



Large field with clods of ploughed earth, mostly downright violet.

Field of ripe wheat in a yellow ochre tone with a little crimson.

The chrome yellow 1 sky almost as bright as the sun itself, which is chrome yellow 1 with a little white, while the rest of the sky is chrome yellow 1 and 2 mixed, very yellow, then.

The sower's smock is blue, and his trousers white. Square no. 25 canvas. There are many repetitions of yellow in the earth, neutral tones, resulting from the mixing of violet with yellow, but I could hardly give a damn about the *veracity* of the colour. Better to make naive almanac pictures — old country almanacs, where hail, snow, rain, fine weather are represented in an utterly primitive way. The way *Anquetin* got his Harvest so well.

I don't hide from you that I don't detest the countryside — having been brought up there, snatches of memories from past times, yearnings for that infinite of which the Sower, the sheaf, are the symbols, still enchant me as before.

But when will I do the starry sky, then, that painting that's always on my mind? Alas, alas, it's just as our excellent pal Cyprien says, in 'En ménage' by *J. K. Huysmans*: the most beautiful paintings are those one dreams of while smoking a pipe in one's bed, but which one doesn't make. But it's a matter of attacking them nevertheless, however incompetent one may feel vis-à-vis the ineffable perfections of nature's glorious splendours.

But how I'd like to see the study you did at the brothel. I reproach myself endlessly for not having done figures here yet.

[[sketch B](#)] Here's another landscape. Setting sun? Moonrise? Summer evening, at any rate.

Town violet, star yellow, sky blue-green; the wheatfields have all the tones: old gold, copper, green gold, red gold, yellow gold, green, red and yellow bronze. Square no. 30 canvas.

I painted it out in the mistral. My easel was fixed in the ground with iron pegs, a method that I recommend to you. [[sketch C](#)] You shove the feet of the easel in and then you push a 50-centimetre-long iron peg in beside them. You tie everything together with ropes; that way you can work in the wind.



mais quand donc ferai je le ciel étoilé ce tableau  
qui toujours me préoccupe. - hélas hélas c'est bien  
comme dit l'excellent Capain Cyprien dans "en ménage" de  
J.K. Huysmans : les plus beaux tableaux sont ceux que l'on rêve  
en fumant des pipes dans son lit mais qu'on ne fait pas. S'agit  
pourtant de les attaquer quelq'un incompetent qu'on se sente ~~et~~ verser  
des ineffables perfections de splendeurs glorieuses de la nature.

mais comme je voudrais voir l'étude que tu as fait au bordel  
je me fais des reproches à n'en plus finir de ne pas encore avoir fait  
des figures ici

Voici encore  
un paysage

Soleil couchant?

Aube de lune?

Soleil d'été en  
tout cas.

Ville violette

astre jaune

Ciel bleu

les flots ont

tous les tons

Violet or cuivre

or vert or rouge

or jaune

bronze jaune

vert rouge. tout de 30 centes

Je l'ai peint en plein mistral.

mon cheval etait pié en l'air avec

des piquets de fer procédé que je te recommande

on enfonce les pieds du cheval et puis on

à côté un piquet de fer long de 50 centimètres

vous pouvez aussi travailler dans le vent

Voici ce que j'ai voulu dire pour le blanc et le noir

prenons le semeur le tableau est coupé en deux

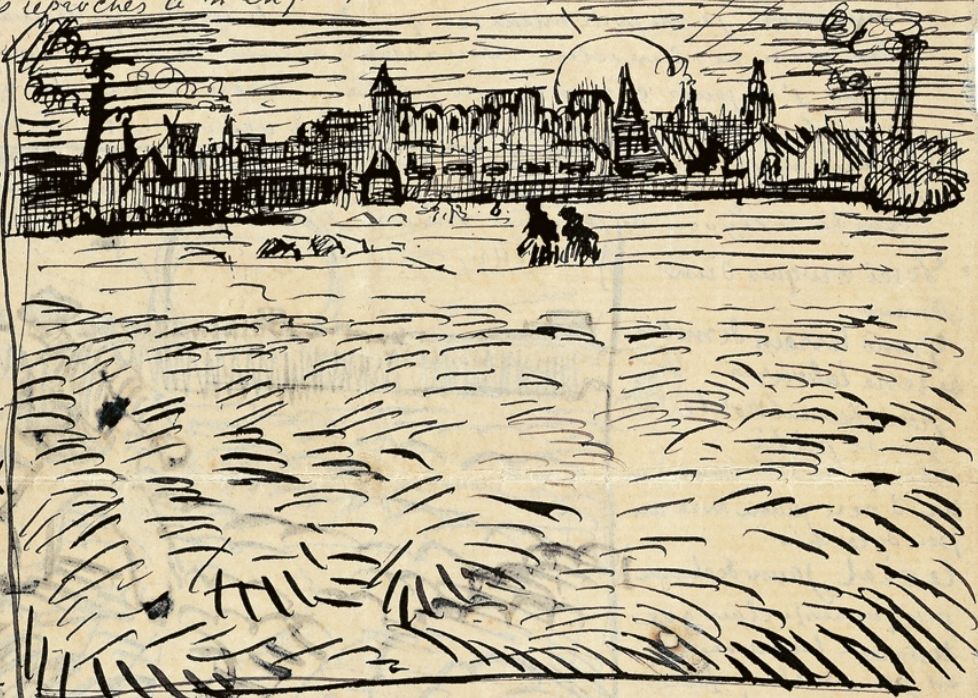
une moitié est jaune, le haut, le bas est violet.

et bien le pantalon blanc repose l'oeil

et le distrair au moment où le contraste simultané

excessif de jaune et de violet l'agacerait. Voilà

ce que j'ai voulu dire



Here's what I wanted to say about the white and the black. Let's take the Sower. The painting is divided into two; one half is yellow, the top; the bottom is violet. Well, the white trousers rest the eye and distract it just when the excessive simultaneous contrast of yellow and violet would annoy it. That's what I wanted to say.

I know a second lieutenant of Zouaves here called Milliet. I give him drawing lessons — with my perspective frame — and he's beginning to make drawings — my word, I've seen a lot worse than that, and he's eager to learn; has been to Tonkin, &c. He's leaving for Africa in October. If you were in the Zouaves he'd take you with him and would guarantee you a wide margin of relative freedom to paint, provided you helped him a little with his own artistic schemes. Could this be of some use to you? If so, LET ME KNOW AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

One reason for working is that canvases are worth money. You'll tell me that first of all this reason is very prosaic, then that you doubt that it's true. But it's true. A reason for not working is that in the meantime canvases and paints only cost us money. Drawings, though, don't cost us much.

Gauguin's bored too in Pont-Aven; complains about isolation, like you. If you went to see him — but I have no idea if he'll stay there, and am inclined to think that he intends to go to Paris. He said that he thought you would have come to Pont-Aven.

My God, if all three of us were here! You'll tell me it's too far away. Fine, *but in winter* — because here one can work outside all year round. That's my reason for loving this part of the world, not having to dread the cold so much, which by preventing my blood from circulating prevents me from thinking, from doing anything at all. You can judge that for yourself when you're a soldier. Your melancholy will go away, which may darned well come from the fact that you have too little blood — or tainted blood, which I don't think, however. It's that bloody filthy Paris wine and the filthy fat of the steaks that do that to you — dear God, I had come to a state in which my own blood was no longer working at all, but literally not at all, as they say. But after 4 weeks down here it got moving again, but, my dear pal, at that same time I had an attack of melancholy like yours, from which I



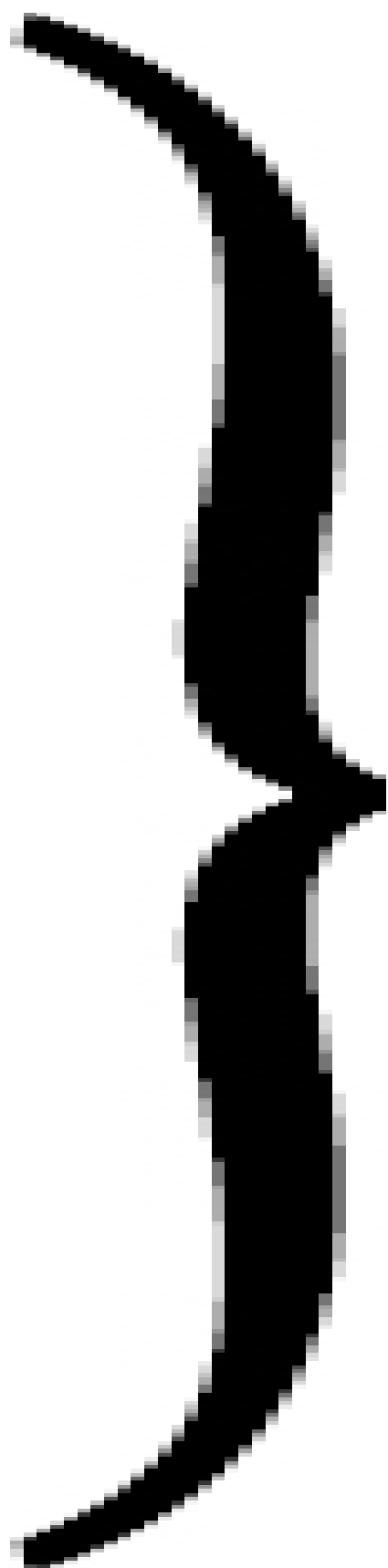
would have suffered as much as you were it not that I welcomed it with great pleasure as a sign that I was going to recover — which happened too.

Instead of going back to Paris, then, stay out in the country, because you need strength to get through this ordeal of going to Africa properly. Now the more blood, and good blood, that you make yourself beforehand, the better, because over there in the heat it's perhaps harder to produce it. Painting and fucking a lot aren't compatible; it weakens the brain, and that's what's really damned annoying.

The symbol of Saint Luke, the patron of painters, is, as you know, an ox; we must therefore be as patient as an ox if we wish to labour in the artistic field. But bulls are pretty glad not having to work in the filthy business of painting. But what I wanted to say is this. After the period of melancholy you'll be stronger than before, your health will pick up — and you'll find the surrounding nature so beautiful that you'll have no other desire than to do painting. I believe that your poetry will also change, in the same way as in your painting. After some eccentric things you have succeeded in making some that have an *Egyptian* calm and a great simplicity.

'How short  
is the hour  
We spend  
loving —  
— It's less  
than an  
instant —  
— A little  
more than a  
dream — :  
— Time  
takes away  
— Our  
spell.

That's not Baudelaire, I don't even know who it's by,  
they're the words of a song in Daudet's *Le Nabab*,  
that's where I took it from — but doesn't it say the  
thing *like a real Lady's shrug of her shoulder*?



These last few days I read Pierre *Loti's* *Madame Chrysanthème*; it provides interesting remarks about Japan. At the moment my brother has an exhibition of Claude Monet, I'd very much like to see them. Guy de Maupassant, among others, had been there, and said that from now on he would often revisit boulevard Montmartre.

I have to go and paint, so I'll finish — I'll probably write to you again before long. I beg a thousand pardons for not having put enough stamps on the letter; and yet I did stamp it AT THE POST OFFICE *and this isn't the first time that it's happened here*, that when in doubt, and asking *at the post office itself*, I've been misled about the postage.

You can't imagine the carelessness, the nonchalance of the people here. Anyway, you'll see that shortly with your own eyes in Africa. Thanks for your letter, I hope to write to you soon at a moment when I'm in less of a hurry. Handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **Arles, Tuesday, 26 June 1888**

To Emile Bernard (letter 632)

My dear Bernard,

You do very well to read the Bible — I start there because I've always refrained from recommending it to you.

When reading your many quotations from Moses, from St Luke, &c., I can't help saying to myself — well, well — that's all he needed. There it is now, full-blown — — — ... the artist's neurosis.

Because the study of Christ inevitably brings it on, especially in my case, where it's complicated by the seasoning of innumerable pipes.

The Bible — that's Christ, because the Old Testament leads towards that summit; St Paul and the evangelists occupy the other slope of the holy mountain.

How petty that story is! My God, are there only these Jews in the world, then? Who start out by declaring that everything that isn't themselves is impure?

The other peoples under the great sun over there — the Egyptians, the Indians, the Ethiopians, Babylon, Nineveh. Why didn't they write their annals with the same care? Still, the study of it is beautiful, and anyway, to be able to read everything would be almost the equivalent of not being able to read at all.

But the consolation of this so saddening Bible, which stirs up our despair and our indignation — thoroughly upsets us, completely outraged by its pettiness and its contagious folly — the consolation it contains, like a kernel inside a hard husk, a bitter pulp — is Christ. The figure of Christ has been painted — as I feel it — only by Delacroix and by Rembrandt..... And then Millet has painted.... Christ's doctrine.

The rest makes me smile a little — the rest of religious painting — from the religious point of view — not from the painting point of view. And the Italian primitives (Botticelli, say), the Flemish, German primitives (V. Eyck, and Cranach)..... They're pagans, and only interest me for the same reason that the Greeks do, and Velázquez, and so many other naturalists. Christ — alone — among all the philosophers, magicians, &c. declared eternal life — the endlessness of time, the non-existence of death — to be the principal certainty. The necessity and the *raison d'être* of serenity and devotion.

Lived serenely as *an artist greater than all artists — disdainful of marble and clay and paint — working in LIVING FLESH*. I.e. — this extraordinary artist, hardly conceivable with the obtuse instrument of our nervous and stupefied modern brains, made neither statues nor paintings nor even books..... he states it loud and clear.. he made.. LIVING men, immortals.

That's serious, you know, especially because it's the truth.

That great artist didn't make books, either — Christian literature as a whole would certainly infuriate him, and its literary products that could find favour beside Luke's Gospel, Paul's epistles — so simple in their hard or warlike form — are few and far between. This great artist — Christ — although he disdained writing books on ideas and feelings — was certainly much less disdainful of the spoken word — THE PARABLE above all. (What a sower, what a harvest, what a fig tree, &c.)

And who would dare tell us that he lied, the day when, scornfully predicting the fall of the buildings of the Romans, he stated, 'heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.'

Those spoken words, which as a prodigal, great lord he didn't even deign to write down, are one of the highest, the highest summit attained by art, which in them becomes a creative force, a pure creative power.

These reflections, my dear old Bernard — take us a very long way — a very long way — *raising us above art itself*. They enable us to glimpse — the art of making life, the art of being immortal — alive.

Do they have connections with painting? The patron of painters — St Luke — physician, painter, evangelist — having for his symbol — alas — nothing but the ox — is there to give us hope.

Nevertheless — our own real life — is humble indeed — our life as painters.

Stagnating under the stupefying yoke of the difficulties of a craft almost impossible to practise on this so hostile planet, on the surface of which 'love of art makes one lose real love'.

Since, however, nothing stands in the way — of the supposition that on the other innumerable planets and suns there may also be lines and shapes and colours — we're still at liberty — to retain a relative serenity as to the possibilities of doing painting in better and changed conditions of existence — an existence changed by a phenomenon perhaps no cleverer and no more surprising than the transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly, of the white grub into a cockchafer.

That existence of painter as butterfly would have for its field of action one of the innumerable stars, which, after death, would perhaps be no more unapproachable, inaccessible to us than the black dots that symbolize towns and villages on the map in our earthly life. Science — scientific reasoning — seems to me to be an instrument that will go a very long way in the future.

Because look — it was thought that the earth was *flat* — that was true — it still is today — from Paris to Asnières, for example.

But that didn't prevent science proving that the earth is above all round. Which nobody disputes nowadays.

Now at present, despite that, we're still in the position of believing that *life is flat* and goes from birth to death.

But life too is probably round, and far superior in extent and potentialities to the single hemisphere that's known to us at present.

Future generations — probably — will enlighten us on this subject that's so interesting — and then science itself — could — with all due



respect — reach conclusions more or less parallel to Christ's words concerning the other half of existence.

Whatever the case — the fact is that we are painters in real life, and it's a matter of breathing one's breath as long as one has breath.

Ah — E. DELACROIX's beautiful painting — Christ's boat on the sea of Gennesaret, he — with his pale lemon halo — sleeping, luminous — within the dramatic violet, dark blue, blood-red patch of the group of stunned disciples. On the terrifying emerald sea, rising, rising all the way up to the top of the frame. Ah — the brilliant sketch.

I would make you some croquis were it not that having drawn and painted for three or four days with a model — a Zouave — I'm exhausted — on the contrary, writing is restful and diverting.

What I've done is very ugly: a drawing of the Zouave, seated, a painted sketch of the Zouave against an all-white wall and lastly his portrait against a green door and some orange bricks of a wall. It's harsh and, well, *ugly* and badly done. However, since that's the real difficulty attacked, it may smooth the way in the future. The figures that I do are almost always detestable in my own eyes, and all the more so in others' eyes — nevertheless, it's the study of the figure that strengthens us the most, if we do it in a different way than we're taught at Monsieur Benjamin-Constant's, for example.

Your letter gave me great pleasure — the CROQUIS IS VERY VERY INTERESTING and I do thank you for it — for my part I'll send you a drawing one of these days — this evening I'm too worn out in that respect; my eyes are tired, even if my brain isn't.

Listen — do you remember *John the Baptist* by Puvis? I find it marvellous and as much the MAGICIAN as Eugène Delacroix.

The passage about John the Baptist that you dug out of the Gospel is absolutely what you saw in it... People pressing around somebody — art thou Christ, art thou Elias? As it would be in our day to ask Impressionism or one of its searcher-representatives, 'have you found it?' That's just it.

At the moment my brother has an exhibition of Claude Monet — 10 paintings done in Antibes from February to May. It seems it's very beautiful.

Have you ever read the life of Luther? Because Cranach, Dürer, Holbein belong to *him* — it's he — *his personality* — that's the lofty light of the Middle Ages.

I like the Sun King no more than you do — extinguisher of light it rather seems to me — that Louis XIV — my God, what a pain, *in every way*, that

Methodist Solomon. I don't like Solomon either, and the Methodists not at all, as well. Solomon seems a hypocritical pagan to me; I really have no respect for his architecture, an imitation of other styles, nor for his writings, which the pagans have done much better.

Tell me a bit about where you stand as far as your military service is concerned; should I talk to that second lieutenant of Zouaves or not? Are you going to Africa or not? In your case, do the years count double in Africa or not? Most of all, see that your blood's in order — you don't get very far with anaemia — painting goes slowly — better try to make your constitution as tough as old boots, a constitution to make old bones — better live like a monk who goes to the brothel once a fortnight — I do that, it's not very poetical — but anyway — I feel that my duty is to subordinate my life to painting.

If I was in the Louvre with you, I'd really like to see the primitives with you.

In the Louvre, I still return with great love to the Dutch, Rembrandt first and foremost — Rembrandt whom I once studied so thoroughly — then Potter, for example — who makes — on a no. 4 or no. 6 panel, a white stallion alone in a meadow, a stallion neighing, and with a hard-on — forlorn under a sky brewing up a thunderstorm — heartbroken in the tender green immensity of a wet meadow — ah well, there are wonderful things in the old Dutchmen having no connection with anything at all. Handshake, and thank you again for your letter and for your croquis.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

The sonnets are going well — i.e. — the colour in them is good — the design isn't as strong, less sure of itself, rather; the conception's still hesitant, I don't know how to put it — its moral purpose isn't clear.

**Arles, Monday, 9 or Tuesday, 10 July 1888**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 638)

My dear Theo,

I've just come back from a day at Montmajour, and my friend the second lieutenant kept me company. So the two of us explored the old garden and we stole some excellent figs there. If it had been bigger it would have made you think of Zola's Paradou, tall reeds, grape vines, ivy, fig trees, olive trees, pomegranate trees with fat flowers of the brightest orange, hundred-year-old cypresses, ash trees and willows, rock oaks. Half-demolished staircases, ruined Gothic windows, clumps of white rock covered in lichen, and pieces of collapsed wall scattered here and there in the undergrowth; I brought back another large drawing of it. Not of the garden, though. That makes 3 drawings; when I have half dozen, will send them.

Yesterday I went to Fontvieille to pay a visit to Boch and MacKnight, but those gentlemen had left for a week for a short trip to Switzerland.

I think the heat is still doing me good, in spite of the mosquitoes and flies.

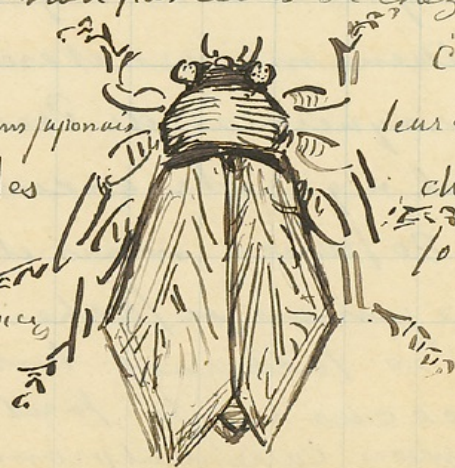
The cicadas — not those at home but like this, [[sketch A](#)] you see them in Japanese albums. And golden and green *Cantharides* swarming on the olive trees. These cicadas (I think their name is *cicada*) sing at least as loudly as a frog.

Mon cher Theo, je rentre d'une journée à Montmajour et mon ami  
 le sous lieutenant m'a tenu compagnie. Nous avons alors à nous  
 deux exploré le vieux jardin et y avons volé d'excellentes figues. Si c'eût été  
 plus grand cela eût fait penser au Paradou de Jola de grands roseaux  
 de la rive du lierre des figuiers des oliviers des grenadiers aux  
 fleurs grâces du plus vif orange des ~~cypres~~ cypres antenaires  
 des frênes et des saules des chênes de roche. des escaliers  
 de moles à demi des fenêtres ogivales en ruine des blocs  
 de blanc rochers couverts de lichens et des pans de murs  
 écroulés <sup>épars çà et là</sup> dans la verdure. j'en ai eu encore rapporté un grand  
 dessein. non pas du jardin cependant. Cela me fait 3 des  
 lorsque j'en aurai deux douzaine les enverrai.  
 Hier j'ai été à Fontvieille pour faire une visite à Bach  
 et à Mac Knight seulement ces messieurs étaient partis pour  
 8 jours pour un petit voyage en Suisse.

Je crois que la chaleur me fait toujours du bien  
 malgré les moustiques et les mouches.

Des cigales - non pas celles de chez nous mais des  
 comme ceci

on les voit sur les aliburns japonais  
 pas des Cantharides  
 dorées et vertes en  
 essaim sur les oliviers



Ces cigales (je crois que  
 leur nom est cicada)  
 chantent au moins aussi  
 fort qu'une grenouille

I had the further thought that if you care to recall that I painted portraits of *père* Tanguy (which he still has), of *mère* Tanguy (which they sold), of their friend (it's true that I was paid 20 francs by him for the latter portrait), that I bought 250 francs worth of colours from Tanguy without a discount, on which he of course made a profit, that after all, I was no less his friend than he was mine, I have the most serious of reasons to doubt his right to demand money from me, which is actually settled with the study of mine that he still has, all the more so since there's the clearly expressed condition that he would be paid with the sale of a painting. Xanthippe, *mère* Tanguy and some other ladies have, by some strange freak of nature, brains of flintstone or gunflint. Certainly these ladies are much more harmful in the civilized society in which they move than the citizens bitten by rabid dogs who live at the Institut Pasteur. So *père* Tanguy would be right a thousand times over if he killed his lady.... but he doesn't do it, any more than Socrates.....

And for that reason *père* Tanguy is more closely connected — in terms of resignation and long patience — with the early Christian martyrs and slaves than with present-day Paris pimps.

Which doesn't mean there's any reason to pay him 80 francs, but there are reasons for never losing your temper with him, even if he might lose his temper when, rightly so in this case, you kick him out, or at least send him packing in no uncertain terms.

I'm writing to Russell at the same time — we probably know, don't we, that the English, the Yankees &c. have this in common with the Dutch, that their charity — — ..... is very Christian. Now, the rest of us not being very good Christians..... That's what I can't stop myself thinking as I write once again.

That Boch looks a bit like a Flemish gentleman from the time of the compromise of the nobles in the time of the Silent one and of Marnix. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he was good.

I've written to Russell that for our exchange I'd send him my consignment rolled up, straight to his home, if I knew he was in Paris.

This way he should in any case reply to me in the next few days.

And now I'll need more canvas and paint *soon*. Only I don't yet have the address for that canvas at 40 francs for 20 metres.



I believe that at this moment I'm doing the right thing by working chiefly on drawings, and seeing to it that I have colours and canvas in reserve for the time when Gauguin comes. I very much wish we could rein ourselves in as little with paint as with pen and paper.

Because I'm afraid of wasting paint, I often spoil a painted study.

*With paper* — if it's not a letter I'm writing but a drawing I'm doing — it hardly ever goes wrong: so many sheets of Whatman, so many drawings. I think if I were rich I'd spend less than now.

Ah well — *père* Martin would say — then we'll have to make sure we get rich — and he's quite right, just as he is about the masterpiece.

Do you remember in Guy de Maupassant the gentleman who hunted rabbits and other game and who had hunted so hard for 10 years and was so worn out with running after game that at the point when he wanted to get married he couldn't get a hard-on, which caused him the greatest anxieties and consternation.

Without being in this gentleman's position as far as having or wishing to get married, in the physical sense I'm beginning to resemble him. According to the excellent master Ziem, a man becomes ambitious the moment he can't get a hard-on. Now, while it's more or less the same to me whether or not I can get a hard-on, I protest when it must inevitably lead me to ambition.

There is no one but the greatest philosopher of his time and of his country, and therefore of all countries and all times — the excellent master Pangloss — who could — if here were there — give me advice and calm my soul.

There we are — the letter for Russell is in its envelope — and I've written as I thought.

I asked him if he had news of Reid, and I put the same question to you.

I told Russell that he was perfectly at liberty to take what he might want, and from the first consignment too. And that I was only waiting for a categorical answer to know whether he wanted to choose at his home or yours. That in the first case, if he wanted to see them at his home — you'd send him some orchards too. And that you'd have all of them brought back, once he'd made his choice. So he can't say anything to that. If he doesn't buy a Gauguin it's because he can't. If he can do it, I'd be inclined to hope he will do it.

I told him that if I was bold enough to insist on a purchase, it *wasn't* that without him the thing wouldn't come about, but that Gauguin having been ill, and given the complication that he'd been in bed and had to pay his doctor, the business was rather hard for us and we were all the more eager to find a collector for a painting.

I think about Gauguin a lot, and would have plenty of ideas for paintings and for work in general. At the moment I have a charwoman, who sweeps and scrubs the house twice a week for 1 franc; I place great hopes in her, to be able to count on her making the beds if we decide to sleep at home. On the other hand, there's a possible arrangement with the chap where I'm lodging at the moment. Anyway, we'll try to ensure that in the end it'll be a saving instead of an expense.

How's your health now? Are you still seeing Gruby?

What you were saying about that conversation at the Nouvelle Athènes is interesting. You're familiar with Desboutin's little portrait that Portier has. It's certainly a strange phenomenon that all artists, poets, musicians, painters are unfortunate in the material sense — even the happy ones — what you were saying recently about Guy de Maupassant proves it once again. That rakes up the eternal question: is *life* visible to us in its entirety, or before we die do we know of only one hemisphere?

Painters — to speak only of them — being dead and buried, speak to a following generation or to several following generations through their works. Is that all, or is there more, even? In the life of the painter, death may perhaps not be the most difficult thing.

For myself, I declare I don't know anything about it. But the sight of the stars always makes me dream *in as simple a way* as the black spots on the map, representing towns and villages, make me dream.

Why, I say to myself, should the spots of light in the firmament be less accessible to us than the black spots on the map of France.

Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star. What's certainly true in this argument is that while *alive*, we *cannot* go to a star, any more than once dead we'd be able to take the train. So it seems to me not impossible that cholera, the stone, consumption, cancer are celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, omnibuses and the railway are terrestrial ones.

To die peacefully of old age would be to go there on foot.

For the moment I'm going to go to bed because it's late, and I wish you good-night and good luck.

Handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **Arles, Monday, 30 July 1888**

To Emile Bernard (letter 651)

My dear old Bernard.

You'll agree, I've no doubt at all, that neither you nor I can have a full idea of what Velázquez and Goya were like as men and as painters, because neither you nor I have seen Spain, their country, and so many fine things that have remained in the south. Even so, what we know of them does count for something in itself.

It goes without saying that for the northerners, Rembrandt first and foremost, it's extremely desirable, when judging these painters, to know both their work in its full extent and their country, and the rather intimate and hidden history of those days, and of the customs of the ancient country.

I want to repeat to you that neither Baudelaire nor you has a sufficiently clear idea when it comes to Rembrandt.

And when it comes to you, I couldn't encourage you enough to take a long look at major and minor Dutchmen before arriving at an opinion. Here it's not just a matter of strange precious stones, but it's a matter of sorting out marvels from among marvels.

And a fair amount of paste from among the diamonds. Thus for myself, having been studying my country's school for 20 years now, in most cases I wouldn't even reply if the subject came up, so much do I generally hear people talk beside the point when the painters of the north are being discussed.

So to you I can only reply, come on, just look a little more closely than that; really, it's worth the effort a thousand times over.

Now if, for example, I claim that the Van Ostade in the Louvre, which shows the painter's family, the man, the wife, the ten or so kids, is a painting

infinitely deserving of study and thought, just like Ter Borch's Peace of Münster. If the paintings in the gallery in the Louvre that I personally *prefer* and find the most astonishing are very often forgotten by the very artists who go to see the Dutchmen, then I'm not in the least surprised, knowing that my own choice in that gallery is based on a knowledge of this subject that most of the French couldn't have.

But if, for example, my opinion differed from yours on those subjects, I'm confident that you would agree with me later. What grieves me at the Louvre is to see their Rembrandts getting spoiled and the cretins in the administration damaging many beautiful paintings. Thus the annoying yellow tonality of certain canvases by Rembrandt is an effect of deterioration through humidity or other causes, instances of which I could point out to you.

As difficult to say what Rembrandt's colour is as to give a name to the Velázquez greys; we could say, for want of something better, 'Rembrandt gold', and that's what we do, but that's quite vague.

Having come to France I have, perhaps better than many Frenchmen themselves, felt Delacroix and Zola, for whom my sincere and frank admiration is boundless.

Since I had a fairly complete idea of Rembrandt. One, Delacroix, proceeds by way of colours, the other, Rembrandt, by values, but they're on a par.

Zola and Balzac, as painters of a society, of reality as a whole, arouse rare artistic emotions in those who love them, for the very reason that they embrace the whole epoch that they paint. When Delacroix paints humanity, life in general instead of an epoch, he belongs to the same family of universal geniuses all the same.

I love the closing words of Silvestre, I think it was, who ends a masterly article like this:

Thus died — almost smiling — Eugène Delacroix, a painter of high breeding — who had a sun in his head and a thunderstorm in his heart — who went from warriors to saints — from saints to lovers — from lovers to tigers — and from the tiger to flowers.

Daumier is also a really great genius.

Millet, another painter of an entire race and the settings in which it lives.

Possible that these great geniuses are no more than crazies, and that to have faith and boundless admiration for them you'd have to be a crazy too. That may well be — I would prefer my madness to other people's wisdom.

To go to Rembrandt indirectly is perhaps the most direct route. Let's talk about Frans Hals. Never did he paint Christs, annunciations to shepherds, angels or crucifixions and resurrections; never did he paint voluptuous and bestial naked women.

He painted portraits; nothing nothing nothing but that.

Portraits of soldiers, gatherings of officers, portraits of magistrates assembled for the business of the republic, portraits of matrons with pink or yellow skin, wearing white bonnets, dressed in wool and black satin, discussing the budget of an orphanage or an almshouse; he did portraits of good citizens with their families, the man, his wife, his child; he painted the tipsy drinker, the old fishwife full of a witch's mirth, the beautiful gypsy whore, babies in swaddling-clothes, the gallant, bon vivant gentleman, moustachioed, booted and spurred; he painted himself and his wife as young lovers on a turf bench in a garden, after their first wedding night. He painted guttersnipes and laughing urchins, he painted musicians and he painted a fat cook.

He doesn't know much more than that, but it's ————— well worth Dante's Paradise and the Michelangelos and Raphaels and even the Greeks. It's beautiful like Zola, and healthier and more cheerful, but just as alive, because his epoch was healthier and less sad. Now what is Rembrandt? The same thing entirely — a painter of portraits. That's the healthy, broad, clear idea that one must have first of all of the two eminent Dutchmen, who are on a par, before going into the subject more deeply.

This fully understood, ALL this glorious republic, represented by these two prolific portraitists, re-created in broad strokes, we retain very wide margins for landscapes, interior scenes, animals, philosophical subjects.

But I beg you, follow this straightforward argument carefully, which I'm doing my utmost to present to you in a very very simple way.

Get him into your head, this Master Frans Hals, painter of various portraits of a whole self-assured and lively and immortal republic. Get into your head the no less great and universal master portrait painter of the Dutch Republic, Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, a broad and naturalistic and healthy man, as much as Hals himself. And after that we'll see flowing from that source, Rembrandt, the direct and true pupils, Vermeer of Delft,



Fabritius, Nicolas Maes, Pieter de Hooch, Bol; and those influenced by him, Potter, Ruisdael, Ostade, Ter Borch. I mention Fabritius to you there, by whom we know only — two canvases — I *don't* mention a heap of good painters, and especially not the paste among these diamonds, paste firmly embedded in ordinary French skulls.

Am I, my dear old Bernard, terribly incomprehensible this time? I'm trying to make you see the great simple thing, the painting of humanity, let's rather say of a whole republic, through the simple medium of the portrait. This first and foremost; later — — — if, on the subject of Rembrandt, we're dealing to some extent with magic, with Christs and nude women, it's very interesting — but it's not the main thing. Let Baudelaire hold his tongue in this department, they're resounding words, and how hollow!!! Let's take Baudelaire for what he is, a modern poet just as Musset is another, but let them leave us alone when we're talking painting.

Handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I *don't* like your drawing *Lubrlicity* as much as the others; I like *the tree*, though, it has a great look.

## **Arles, Sunday, 9 September 1888**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 677)

My dear Theo,

I've just put the croquis of the new painting, THE 'NIGHT CAFÉ', in the post — as well as another one that I did some time ago. I'll perhaps end up making some Japanese prints.

Now yesterday I worked at furnishing the house. Just as the postman and his wife told me, the two beds, if you want something sturdy, will come to 150 francs each. I found that everything they'd told me about prices was true. As a result I had to change tack, and this is what I did: I bought one bed in walnut and another in deal, which will be mine, and which I'll paint later.

Then I bought linen for one of the beds, and I bought two palliasses. If Gauguin or somebody else were to come, there you are, his bed will be made in a minute. From the start, I wanted to arrange the house not just for myself but in such a way as to be able to put somebody up.

Naturally, that ate up most of my money.

With what was left, I bought 12 chairs, a mirror, and some small indispensable things. Which in short means that next week I'll be able to go and live there.

For putting somebody up, there'll be the prettiest room upstairs, which I'll try to make as nice as possible, like a woman's boudoir, really artistic. Then there'll be my own bedroom, which I'd like to be exceedingly simple, but the furniture square and broad.

The bed, the chairs, table, all in deal. Downstairs, the studio and another room, also a studio, but a kitchen at the same time.

One of these days you'll see a painting of the little house itself, in full sunshine or else with the window lit and the starry sky.

Then you'll be able to believe you own your country house here in Arles. Because I myself am enthusiastic about the idea of arranging it in such a way that you'll like it, and that it'll be a studio in a style absolutely meant to be that way.

Let's say that in a year you come to spend a holiday here and in Marseille, it will be ready then — and the way I envisage it, the house will be just full of paintings from top to bottom.

The room where you'll stay then, or which will be Gauguin's if Gauguin comes, will have a decoration of large yellow sunflowers on its white walls.

Opening the window in the morning, you see the greenery in the gardens and the rising sun and the entrance of the town.

But you'll see these big paintings of bouquets of 12, 14 sunflowers stuffed into this tiny little boudoir with a pretty bed and everything else elegant. It won't be commonplace.

And the studio — the red floor-tiles, the white walls and ceiling, the rustic chairs, the deal table, with, I hope, decoration of portraits. That will have character à la *Daumier* — and it won't, I dare predict, be commonplace.

Now I'm going to ask you to look for some Daumier lithographs for the studio, and some Japanese prints, but it's not at all urgent, and only when

you find duplicates of them.

And some Delacroixs too, ordinary lithographs by modern artists.

It's not the least little bit urgent, but I have my idea. I really want to make of it — AN ARTISTS' HOUSE but not precious, on the contrary, *nothing precious*, but everything from the chair to the painting having character.

So for the beds I bought local beds, two wide double beds, instead of iron beds. It gives a look of solidity, durability, calm, and if it takes a bit more bed-linen, that's too bad, but it must have character.

Most fortunately I have a charwoman who's very loyal; without that I wouldn't dare begin the business of living in my own place. She's quite old and has a mixed bunch of kids, and she keeps my tiles nice and red and clean.

I wouldn't be able to explain to you how pleased I am to find a big, serious job this way. Because I hope it'll be a true decoration that I'm going to undertake there.

So, as I've already told you, I'm going to paint my own bed, there'll be 3 subjects. Perhaps a naked woman, I haven't decided, perhaps a cradle with a child; I don't know, but I'll take my time.

I now no longer feel any hesitation about staying here, because ideas for work are coming to me in abundance. I now plan to buy some article for the house every month. And with patience, the house will be worth something for the furniture and the decorations.

I must warn you that very shortly I'll need a big order for colours for the autumn, which I believe is going to be absolutely marvellous. And on reflection, I'll send you the order enclosed herewith.

In my painting of the night café I've tried to express the idea that the café is a place where you can ruin yourself, go mad, commit crimes. Anyway, I tried with contrasts of delicate pink and blood-red and wine-red. Soft Louis XV and Veronese green contrasting with yellow greens and hard blue greens.

All of that in an ambience of a hellish furnace, in pale sulphur.

To express something of the power of the dark corners of a grog-shop.

And yet with the appearance of Japanese gaiety and Tartarin's good nature.

But what would Mr Tersteeg say about this painting? He who, looking at a Sisley — Sisley, the most tactful and sensitive of the Impressionists — had already said: 'I can't stop myself thinking that the artist who painted that

was a little tipsy'. Looking at my painting, then, he'd say that it's a full-blown case of delirium tremens.

I find absolutely nothing to object to what you speak of, to exhibit sometime at the Revue Indépendante, as long as I'm not a cause of obstruction for the others who usually exhibit there.

Only we'd then have to tell them that I'd like to reserve a second exhibition for myself, after this first one of what are in fact studies.

Then next year I'd give them the decoration of the house to exhibit, when there would be an ensemble. Not that I insist, but it's so that the studies shouldn't be confused with compositions, and to say beforehand that the first exhibition would be one of *studies*.

Because there's still hardly more than the sower and the night café that are attempts at composed paintings.

As I write, the little peasant who looks like a caricature of our father is just coming into the café.

The resemblance is amazing, all the same. The receding profile and the weariness and the ill-defined mouth, especially. It continues to seem a pity to me that I haven't been able to do him.

I'm adding to this letter the order for colours, which isn't exactly urgent. Only I'm so full of plans, and then the autumn promises so many superb subjects that I simply don't know if I'm going to start 5 or 10 canvases.

It'll be the same thing as in the spring, with the orchards in blossom, the subjects will be innumerable. If you gave *père* Tanguy the coarser paint, he'd probably do that well.

His other fine colours are really inferior, especially for the blues.

I hope, when preparing the next consignment, to gain a little in *quality*.

I'm doing comparatively less, and coming back to it longer. I've kept back 50 francs for the week; thus there has already been 250 for the furniture. And I'll recoup them anyway, doing it this way. And from today you can say to yourself that you have a sort of country house, unfortunately a bit far away. But it would cease to be very, very far if we had a permanent exhibition in Marseille. We'll see that in a year, perhaps. Handshake and

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## Arles, on or about Saturday, 29 September 1888

To Theo van Gogh (letter 691)

My dear Theo,

Thank you very much for your letter and for the 50-franc note it contained. It's not a rosy prospect that the pains in your leg have come back — my God — it should have to be possible for you to live in the south as well, because I always think that what we need is sunshine and fine weather and blue air as the most dependable remedy. The weather's still fine here, and if it was always like that it would be better than the painters' paradise, it would be Japan altogether. How I think of you and of Gauguin and of Bernard, everywhere and at all times! It's so beautiful, and I'd so much like to see everyone over here.

Included herewith little croquis of a square no. 30 canvas — the starry sky at last, actually painted at night, under a gas-lamp. The sky is green-blue, the water is royal blue, the fields are mauve. The town is blue and violet. The gaslight is yellow, and its reflections are red gold and go right down to green bronze. Against the green-blue field of the sky the Great Bear has a green and pink sparkle whose discreet paleness contrasts with the harsh gold of the gaslight.

Two small coloured figures of lovers in the foreground.

Likewise croquis of a square no. 30 canvas showing the house and its surroundings under a sulphur sun, under a pure cobalt sky. That's a really difficult subject! But I want to conquer it for that very reason. Because it's tremendous, these yellow houses in the sunlight and then the incomparable freshness of the blue.

All the ground's yellow, too. I'll send you another, better drawing of it than this croquis from memory; the house to the left is pink, with green shutters; the one that's shaded by a tree, that's the restaurant where I go to eat supper every day. My friend the postman lives at the bottom of the street on the left, between the two railway bridges.

The night café that I painted isn't in the painting; it's to the left of the restaurant.

Milliet finds it horrible, but I don't need to tell you that when he says he can't understand that someone can enjoy doing such an ordinary grocer's shop, and such stiff, square houses with no charm at all, I reflect that Zola



did a certain boulevard at the beginning of L'assommoir and Flaubert a corner of quai de la Villette in the summer heat, at the beginning of Bouvard et Pécuchet, that aren't half bad. And it does me good to do what's *difficult*. That doesn't stop me having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word — for religion — so I go outside at night to paint the stars, and I always dream a painting like that, with a group of lively figures of the pals.

Now I have a letter from Gauguin, who seems very sad and says he'll definitely come once he's made a sale, but still doesn't commit himself as to whether, if he had his fare paid, he would simply agree to untangle himself over there. He says that the people where he's staying are and have been faultless towards him, and that to leave them like that would be a bad deed. But that I turn a dagger in his heart if I were to believe that he wouldn't come straightaway if he could. And furthermore, that if you could sell his canvases cheaply, he for one would be happy. I'll send you his letter with the reply.

Certainly, his arrival would increase the importance of this venture of painting in the south by 100 per cent. And once here, I don't see him leaving soon, because I believe he would put down roots.

And I always say to myself that with his collaboration, what you do in private would eventually be a more considerable thing than my work on my own; you would have more satisfaction without an increase in expenses.

Later, if some day you were perhaps established on your own account with Impressionist paintings, we'd only have to continue and to expand what exists at present. Lastly, Gauguin says that Laval has found someone who'll give him 150 francs a month, for a year at least, and that Laval will perhaps also come in February. And I having written to Bernard that I believed that he couldn't live on less than 3.50 or 4 francs a day in the south, for board and lodging alone, he says that he believes that for 200 francs a month there would be board and lodging for all 3, which isn't impossible, by the way, living and eating at the studio.

This Benedictine priest must have been very interesting. What, in his opinion, is the religion of the future likely to be? He'll probably say, still the same as the past. *Victor Hugo says, God is a lighthouse whose beam flashes on and off*, and so now, of course, we're passing through that darkness.

My only wish is that they could manage to prove something that would be calming to us, that would console us so that we'd cease to feel guilty or unhappy, and that just as we are we could proceed without getting lost in

loneliness or nothingness, and without having at each step to fear or nervously calculate the harm which, without wishing to, we might cause others.

That odd fellow, Giotto, whose biography said that he was always unwell, and always full of ardour and ideas. Well, I'd like to be able to attain that self-confidence that makes a person happy, cheerful and lively at all times. That can happen much more easily in the country or a small town than in that Parisian furnace.

I wouldn't be surprised if you liked the starry night and the ploughed fields — they're calmer than some other canvases. If the work always went like that I'd have fewer worries about money, because people would come to it more easily if the technique continued to be more harmonious. But this bloody mistral is a real nuisance for doing brushstrokes that hold together and intertwine well, with feeling, like a piece of music played with emotion.

With this quiet weather, I let myself go and I have less need to struggle against impossibilities.

Tanguy's consignment has arrived and I thank you for it very, very much, because this way I hope to be able to do something during the autumn for the next exhibition. What's most urgent now is 5 or even 10 metres of canvas. I'll write to you again and will send you Gauguin's letter with the reply. Very interesting what you say about Maurin; at 40 francs his drawings are certainly not dear. More and more I believe that we must believe that true and fair dealing in paintings is to follow one's taste, one's education looking at the masters, one's faith, in a word. It is *no easier*, I'm convinced, to make a good painting than to find a diamond or a pearl; it requires effort, and you stake your life as a dealer or an artist on it. So once you have good stones, it's important not to lack faith in yourself either, but boldly keep things at a certain price.

While waiting, however.... But all the same, that thought gives me courage to work, while, however, I naturally suffer from the fact of having to spend money. But this thought of the pearl came to me right in the midst of my suffering, and I wouldn't be surprised if it did you good, too, in your moments of discouragement. There are no more good paintings than there are diamonds.

And there's absolutely nothing dishonest about dealing in good stones. One can believe in oneself when the thing one's selling is good. Now if,


though, people like paste, they're at liberty to do so, and since they ask for it, well, one may keep it in stock.

But that isn't enough to feel one is oneself – with good paintings, though, one can feel one is oneself and be firm, because it's a pure error to think that there are as many as one wishes. Perhaps I express myself badly, but I've thought about it a lot lately, and calm has come to me about the Gauguin business.

All these Gauguins are good stones, and let's boldly be the dealers in Gauguins.

Milliet greets you warmly, I have his portrait now, with the red képi against an emerald background, and in this background the emblem of his regiment, the crescent and a 5-pointed star. [[sketch A](#)]

153  
Et faire le commerce de des bonnes  
pierres cela n'a absolument rien de  
machanneté. On peut croire en soi  
lorsqu'on voit que la chose qu'on vend est  
bonne. maintenant si maintenant les gens  
aiment le plus/ cela leur est possible  
mais et jusqu'à ils le demandent bon  
on peut en avoir en magasin  
mais cela ne suffit pas pour se sentir  
soi. avec les bons tableaux pendant  
on peut se sentir soi et être ferme  
car c'est pure erreur qu'il y en ait  
tant qu'on veut. Peut-être je m'exprime  
mal mais j'y ai beaucoup pensé  
de ces jours-ci et le calme m'est venu  
pour l'affaire Gouguin

Tous ces Gouguin sont de bonnes  
pierres et soyons les marchands  
des Gouguin hardiment.  
Mille et le dit bien le bonjour j'ai  
son portrait maintenant avec  
la reprise sur fond émeraude et  
dans le fond les armes de son régiment  
le croissant et une étoile à 5 pointes.   
bonne nuit me de main et à bientôt  
et bon merci et j'espère que les docteurs  
ne durera pas. As tu vu un médecin  
Jougnel car le docteur physique est si  
ajouté  
t a t  
Vincent

691A. *Crescent moon and star*

Good handshake and more soon, and thank you very much, and I hope your pains won't last. Have you seen a doctor again? Look after yourself, because physical pain is so annoying.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

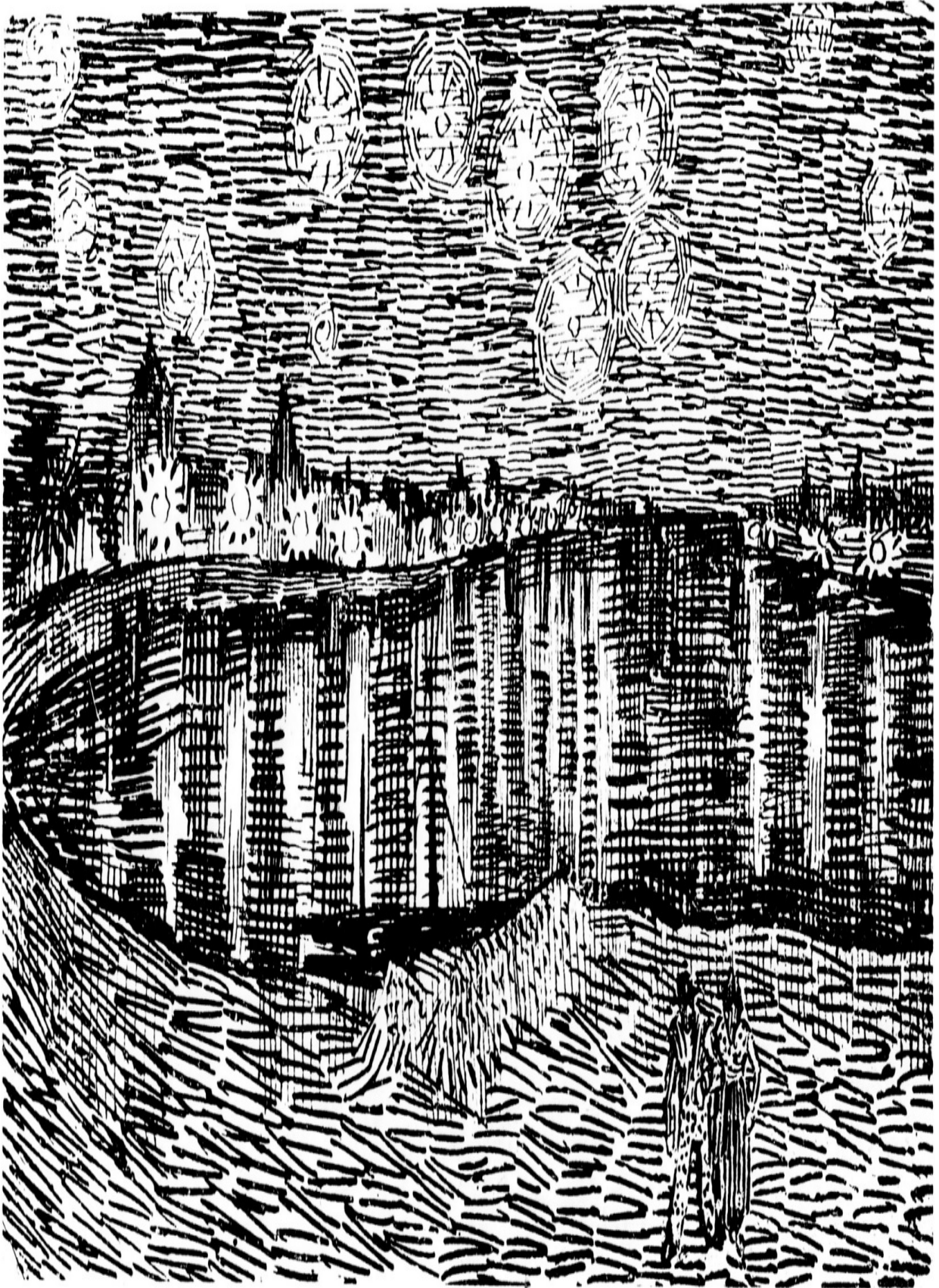
[[sketches B](#), [C](#)]





691B. *The Yellow House* ('*The street*')  



## Arles, Wednesday, 3 October 1888

To Paul Gauguin (letter 695)

My dear Gauguin,

This morning, I received your excellent letter, which I've immediately sent to my brother; your conception of the Impressionist in general, of which your portrait is a symbol, is striking. I couldn't be more intrigued to see it — but it will seem to me, I'm already sure, that this work is too important for me to wish to have it as an exchange.

But if you wish to keep it for us, my brother will buy it from you, as I immediately asked him, at the first opportunity if you wish, and let's hope that will be very soon.

Because we'll try once again to urge the possibility of your coming.

I must tell you that even while working I never cease to think about this enterprise of setting up a studio with yourself and me as permanent residents, but which we'd both wish to make into a shelter and a refuge for our pals at moments when they find themselves at an impasse in their struggle. When you left Paris, my brother and I spent more time there together that will always remain unforgettable to me. Our discussions took on a broader scope — with Guillaumin, with Pissarro, father and son, with Seurat, whom I didn't know (I visited his studio just a few hours before my departure). In these discussions, it was often a matter of the thing that's so dear to our hearts, both my brother's and mine, the steps to be taken in order to preserve the financial existence of painters, and to preserve the means of production (colours, canvases), and to preserve directly to them their share in the price that their paintings at present fetch only when they have long ceased to be the property of the artists.

When you're here we'll go back over all those discussions.

In any event, when I left Paris very, very upset, quite ill and almost an alcoholic through overdoing it, while my strength was abandoning me — then I withdrew into myself, and without daring to hope yet.

At present, dimly on the horizon, here it comes to me nevertheless — hope — that intermittent hope that has sometimes consoled me in my lonely

life.

Now I'd like to see you taking a very large share in this belief that we'll be relatively successful in founding something lasting.

When we'll talk about those strange days of discussions in the poor studios and the cafés of the *Petit Boulevard*, and you'll see in full our idea, my brother's and mine, which hasn't in any way been carried out, in terms of forming an association.

Nevertheless, you'll see that it is such that everything that we'll do in future to remedy the terrible state of these past few years will either be just what we said, or something similar to it. So unshakeable a basis will we have given the thing. And you'll admit, when you have the full explanation, that we've gone *well beyond* the plan we've already told you about. It's no more than our duty as picture dealers to have gone further, because you perhaps know that I too spent years in the trade, and I don't look down on a profession in which I've eaten my daily bread.

Suffice it to say that I don't believe that even when apparently cutting yourself off from Paris you will cease to feel that you're in fairly direct contact with Paris.

I have an extraordinary fever for work these days, at present I'm grappling with a landscape with blue sky above an immense green, purple, yellow vine with black and orange shoots.

Little figures of ladies with red sunshades, little figures of grape-pickers with their cart further liven it up.

Foreground of grey sand. Once again square no. 30 canvas for the decoration of the house.

I have a portrait of myself, all ash-coloured. The ashy colour that comes from mixing Veronese with orange lead, on a pale background of uniform Veronese, with a red-brown garment. But exaggerating my personality also, I looked more for the character of a bonze, a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha. It cost me a good deal of trouble, but I'll have to do it all over again if I want to express the thing. I'll have to cure myself even further of the conventional numbness of our so-called civilized state, in order to have a better model for a better painting.

Something that gave me enormous pleasure; I received a letter from Boch yesterday (his sister is one of the Belgian Vingtistes), who writes that he's settled in the Borinage to paint miners and coal-mines there. He'll



return, though, to what he has in mind in the south — to vary his impressions, and in that case will certainly come to Arles.

I find my artistic ideas extremely commonplace in comparison with yours.

I always have an animal's coarse appetites. I forget everything for the external beauty of things, *which I'm unable to render* because I make it ugly in my painting, and coarse, whereas nature seems perfect to me.

Now, however, the energy of my bony carcass is such that it goes straight to the target; from that comes a perhaps sometimes original sincerity in what I make, if, that is, the subject lends itself to my rough and unskilful execution.

I believe that if from now on you began to think of yourself as *the head of this studio*, which we'll attempt to make a refuge for several people, little by little, bit by bit, as our unremitting work provides us with the means to bring the thing to completion — I believe that then you'll feel relatively consoled for your present misfortunes of penury and illness, considering that we're probably giving our lives for a generation of painters that will survive for many years to come.

These parts of the world have already seen both the cult of Venus — essentially artistic in Greece — and the poets and artists of the Renaissance. Where these things have been able to flower, Impressionism can do so too.

About the room where you'll stay, I've made a decoration especially for it, the *garden of a poet* (in the croquis Bernard has there's a first idea for it, later simplified). The unremarkable public garden contains plants and bushes that make one dream of landscapes in which one may readily picture to oneself Botticelli, Giotto, Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio. In the decoration I've tried to tease out the essence of what constitutes the changeless character of the region.

And I'd have wished to paint this garden in such a way that one would think both of the old poet of this place (or rather, of Avignon), Petrarch, and of its new poet — Paul Gauguin.

However clumsy this effort, you'll still see, perhaps, that while preparing your studio I've thought of you with very deep feeling.

Let's be of good heart for the success of our enterprise, and may you continue to feel very much at home here.

Because I'm so strongly inclined to believe that all this will last for a long time.

Good handshake, and believe me

Ever yours,  
Vincent

Only I'm afraid that you'll find Brittany more beautiful — even though you may well see nothing more beautiful than things out of Daumier, figures here are often pure Daumier. Now, as for you, it won't take you long to discover, under all the modernity, the ancient world and the Renaissance, which is sleeping. Now, as far as they're concerned, you're at liberty to reawaken them.

Bernard tells me that he, Moret, Laval and someone else would do an exchange with me. I am really, in principle, a great supporter of the system of exchanges among artists, since I see that it occupied a considerable place in the life of the Japanese painters. So one of these days I'll send you such studies as I have to spare, in the dry state, and you'll have first choice.

But I won't exchange a single one with you if on your part it would mean costing you something as significant as your portrait, which would be too beautiful. *For sure*, I wouldn't dare, because my brother will gladly buy it from you against a whole month's allowance.

## **Arles, Wednesday, 17 October 1888**

To Paul Gauguin (letter 706)

My dear Gauguin,

Thanks for your letter, and thanks most of all for your promise to come as early as the twentieth. Agreed, this reason that you give won't help to make a pleasure trip of the train journey, and it's only right that you should put off your journey until you can do it without it being a bloody nuisance. But that apart, I almost envy you this trip, which will show you, *en passant*, miles and miles of countryside of different kinds with autumn splendours.

I still have in my memory the feelings that the journey from Paris to Arles gave me this past winter. How I watched out to see 'if it was like Japan yet'! Childish, isn't it?

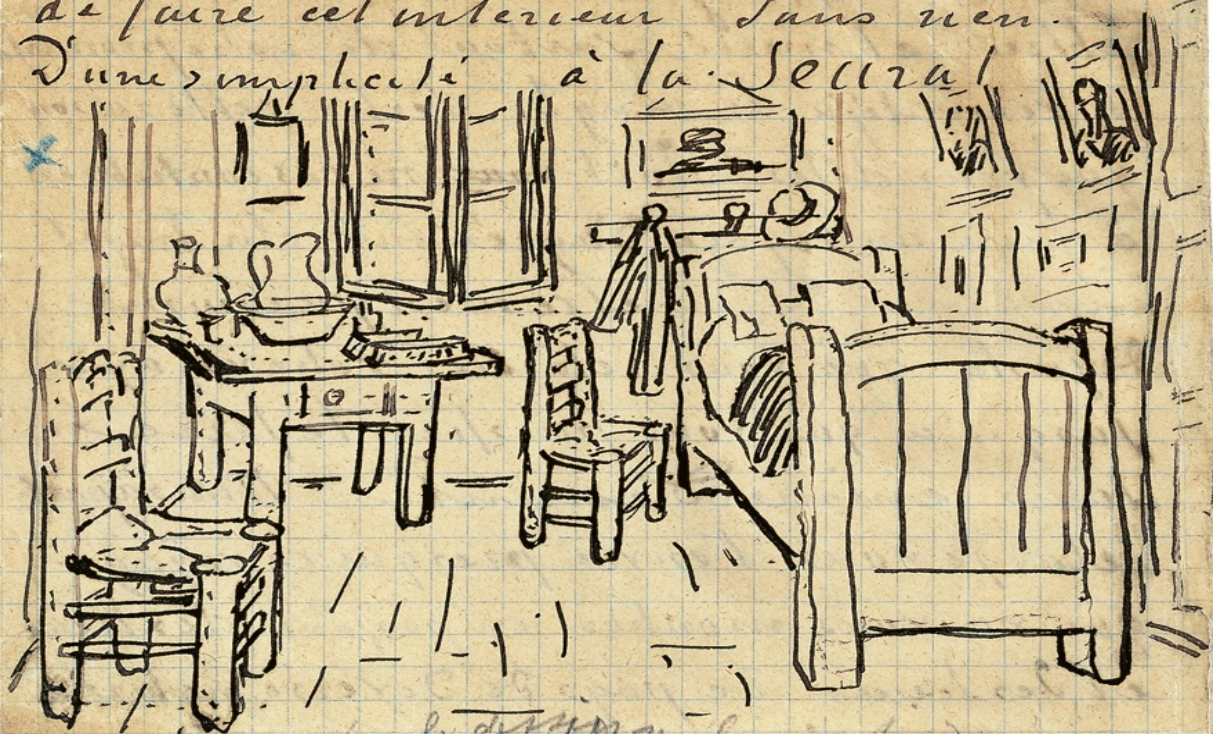
Look here, I wrote to you the other day that my vision was strangely tired. Well, I rested for two and a half days, and then I got back to work. But not yet daring to go outside, I did, for my decoration once again, a no. 30 canvas of my bedroom with the whitewood furniture that you know. Ah, well, it amused me enormously doing this bare interior.

With a simplicity à la *Seurat*.

[[sketch A](#)] In flat tints, but coarsely brushed in full impasto, the walls pale lilac, the floor in a broken and faded red, the chairs and the bed chrome yellow, the pillows and the sheet very pale lemon green, the bedspread blood-red, the dressing-table orange, the washbasin blue, the window green. I had wished to express *utter repose* with all these very different tones, you see, among which the only white is the little note given by the mirror with a black frame (to cram in the fourth pair of complementaries as well).



Eh bien cela m'a énormément amusé  
de faire cet intérieur sans rien.  
D'une simplicité à la Secura!



A tentes, plates mais grossièrement brossées  
en pleine pâte les murs, les papiers  
le sol d'un rouge rompu à l'air les  
chaises & le lit jaune de chrome les oreilles  
et le drap Echon vert très pâle la couverture  
rouge sang la table & la chaise orangée  
la cuvette bleue la fenêtre verte  
J'avais voulu exprimer un repos ~~absolu~~  
absolu par tous ces tons très divers  
rouges et où il n'y a de blanc que  
la petite note que donne le miroir à  
cadre noir (pour l'ajouter encore la quatrième  
partie de complémentaires dedans)  
Enfin vous voyez cela avec les autres et nous  
en causerons. Car je ne suis souvent

Anyway, you'll see it with the others, and we'll talk about it. Because I often don't know what I'm doing, working almost like a sleepwalker.

It's beginning to get cold, especially on the days when the mistral blows.

I've had gas put in the studio, so that we'll have good light in winter.

Perhaps you'll be disillusioned with Arles if you come at a time when the mistral's blowing, but wait... It's in the long term that the poetry down here soaks in.

You won't find the house as comfortable yet as we'll gradually try to make it. There are so many expenses, and it can't be done in one go. Anyway, I believe that once here, like me, you'll be seized with a fury to paint the autumn effects, in between spells of the mistral. And that you'll understand that I've insisted that you come now that there are some very beautiful days. Au revoir, then.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **Arles, Monday, 17 or Tuesday, 18 December 1888**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 726)

My dear Theo,

Yesterday Gauguin and I went to Montpellier to see the museum there, and especially the Bruyas room — there are many portraits of Bruyas, by Delacroix, by Ricard, by Courbet, by Cabanel, by Couture, by Verdier, by Tassaert, by others too. After that there are paintings by Delacroix, Courbet, Giotto, Paul Potter, Botticelli, T. Rousseau, very fine.

Bruyas was a benefactor to artists, and this is all I'll say to you: in the Delacroix portrait, he's a gentleman with a beard, red hair, who looks damnably like you or me, and who made me think of that poem by Musset... everywhere I touched the earth, an unfortunate man dressed in black came to sit beside us, a man who looked at us like a brother. It would have the same effect on you, I'm sure.



I'd really ask you to go and see, at that bookshop where they sell lithographs of ancient and modern artists, if you could manage to get the lithograph after Delacroix's 'Tasso in the madhouse' without great expense, since it would seem to me that this figure (by Delacroix) must have some relationship to this fine Bruyas portrait.

They have other Delacroixs there, a study of a mulatto woman (which Gauguin once copied), the Odalisques, Daniel in the lions' den.

By Courbet, first, *The village girls*, magnificent, a nude woman seen from the back, another on the ground, in a landscape. Second, The woman spinning (superb), and a whole load more Courbets. Anyway, you must know that this collection exists, or else know people who have seen it, and consequently be able to talk about it. So I shan't insist on the museum (except for the Barye drawings and bronzes!)

Gauguin and I talk a lot about Delacroix, Rembrandt &c.

The discussion is *excessively electric*. We sometimes emerge from it with tired minds, like an electric battery after it's run down.

We've been right in the midst of magic, for as Fromentin says so well, Rembrandt is above all a magician and Delacroix a man of God, of God's thunder and bugger off in the name of God.

I'm writing this to you with reference to our friends, the Dutchmen De Haan and Isaäcson, who have so sought and loved Rembrandt, in order to encourage you to pursue the researches.

One mustn't get discouraged about that. You know the strange and superb portrait of a man by Rembrandt at the La Caze gallery, I told Gauguin that, for me, I saw in it a certain family or racial resemblance to Delacroix, or to him, Gauguin.

I don't know why, but I always call that portrait '*the traveller*' or '*the man coming from far away*'.

That's an equivalent and parallel idea to what I've already told you, always to look at the portrait of old Six. The fine portrait with the glove for your future, and the Rembrandt etching, Six reading by a window in a ray of sunlight, for your past and your present.

That's the stage we're at.

Gauguin said to me this morning, when I asked him how he felt: 'that he could feel his old self coming back', which gave me great pleasure.

As for me, coming here last winter, tired and almost fainting mentally, I too suffered a little inside before I was able to begin to remake myself.

How I'd like you to see that museum in Montpellier some day, there are some really beautiful things there!

Say so to Degas, that Gauguin and I have been to see the portrait of Bruyas by Delacroix at Montpellier, for we must boldly believe that *what is, is*, and the portrait of Bruyas by Delacroix resembles you and me like a new brother.

As regards setting up a life with painters as pals, you see such odd things and I'll end with what you always say, time will tell.

You can tell all this to our friends Isaäcson and De Haan, and even boldly read them this letter, I would already have written to them if I'd felt the necessary electric force.

On behalf of Gauguin as well as myself, a good, hearty handshake to you all.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

If you think that Gauguin or I have a *facility* in our work, the work isn't always accommodating. And for the Dutchmen not to get discouraged in their difficulties any more than we do, that's what I wish for them, and for you too.

# Seeking New Balance

## Arles and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, January 1889–April 1890

On the evening of 23 December 1888, Van Gogh suffered an acute mental breakdown and cut off his ear. The police found him at home the next morning and had him admitted to hospital, where he was treated by Dr Félix Rey. Gauguin sent a telegram to Theo, who immediately took the night train to Arles. Theo and Gauguin returned to Paris on Christmas Day. Although they resumed their correspondence, Van Gogh and Gauguin would never see one another again.

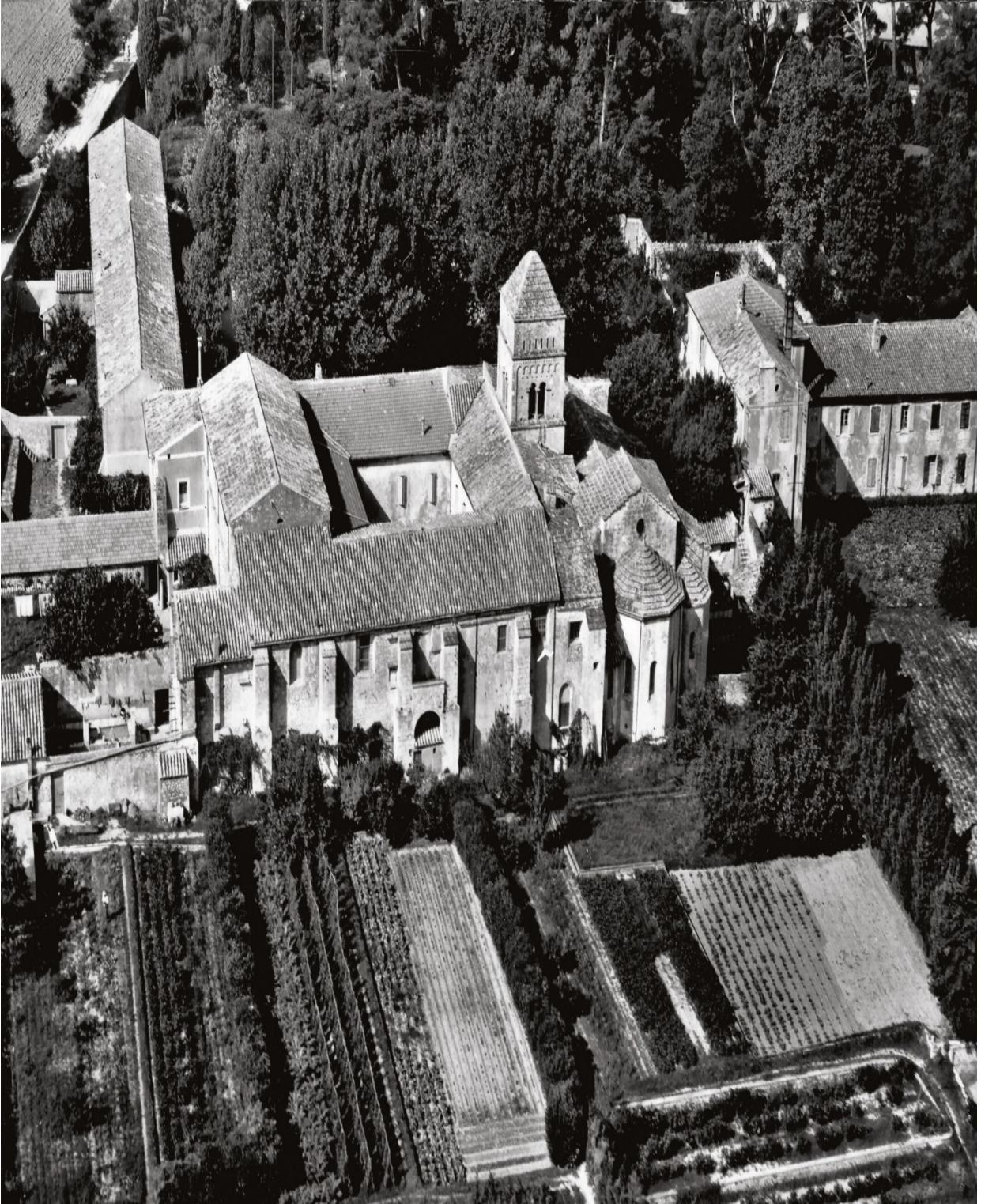
Vincent's collapse marked the first of a series of attacks of mental illness: at intervals of one to several weeks, he repeatedly spent a few days in complete confusion, plagued by unbearable fears and hallucinations, not knowing what he was doing. During most of his hospital stay he was under strict surveillance; the people near the Yellow House no longer wanted him near them, and had even submitted a petition to that effect to the mayor. Van Gogh felt betrayed by his neighbours, but, powerless to act, he was forced to resign himself to the situation. Gauguin, too, had betrayed him, not only by departing so hastily from Arles, but also by refusing to visit Van Gogh in the hospital on the day after the incident, when he was still in town, even though his friend had expressly requested it.

Van Gogh frequently quoted Pangloss, the pseudo-philosopher from Voltaire's *Candide*, saying that everything always turned out for the best in this best of all possible worlds. At times he joked about his condition: having already contracted his insanity, at least he could not catch it again. He explained away things he could have blamed on others, and tried to cling to more positive thoughts.



The hospital in Arles





The asylum Saint-Paul de Mausole, Saint-Rémy

Vincent expressed deep respect for the medical profession and was filled with feelings of both gratitude and guilt towards Theo, who had



invested so much money in him and now could only fear that the 'undertaking' would never pay off. No matter how hard Theo tried in his letters to assuage his brother's guilty feelings, they pressed down on Vincent like a lead weight. Moreover, he was worried that everything would change for the worse in April 1889, when Theo was to marry Jo Bonger, for Theo would then have less money available, especially if he gave up his job at Boussod, Valadon & Cie – a possibility the brothers had discussed.

Van Gogh had always placed great demands on himself in order to give his utmost to his art, but now that both his mind and his body had let him down, he no longer had any faith in the future. Now he feared that he would never produce anything of importance and would remain, at best, a second-rate painter. He resigned himself to defeat.

The deterioration of his health had caused a decline in Van Gogh's artistic production in these months. He made repetitions of canvases he thought important, such as *La Berceuse* and *Sunflowers*. Direct references to his unfortunate situation are two self-portraits with bandaged ear, a portrait of Dr Félix Rey, and two paintings of the hospital in Arles: one of a ward and the other of the garden in the inner courtyard. Most of these works are undiminished in strength and betray no sign of suffering – but given the great effort it cost him to make them, it is no wonder that he was less productive in this period.

His neighbours kept their distance, but Vincent also encountered support. Roulin helped with practical matters, and occasionally informed Theo of Vincent's condition. He had good talks with Dr Rey. Paul Signac visited him and wrote to him. The Reverend Frédéric Salles, a Protestant clergyman living in Arles, acted as a go-between, took care of anything to do with the authorities and arranged Van Gogh's admission to the clinic for the mentally ill of Saint-Paul de Mausole in nearby Saint-Rémy. Van Gogh realized that he was not capable of living on his own. At the beginning of May he sent Theo more than thirty paintings and one drawing, and on 8 May he let the ever-helpful Salles accompany him to the asylum.

The village of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is twenty-five kilometres northeast of Arles. The asylum where Van Gogh would spend a year of his life was originally a twelfth-century convent, and the nursing staff still included a number of nuns. Van Gogh was given a small room with a barred window and an extra room in which to work. The treatment consisted of a two-hour bath twice a week, and moderation in eating, smoking and

drinking. He had little contact with his fellow sufferers, most of whom seemed to be in considerably worse shape than he was.



The view from Van Gogh's room in Saint-Paul de Mausole

The very first letters Van Gogh wrote from the asylum make it clear that he felt safer there, and that this had a calming effect on him. He now found himself in an environment where he was no longer a danger to himself or anyone else. The severe cases all around him helped him put his own condition in perspective, and he began 'to consider madness as being an illness like any other' (772). Dr Théophile Peyron, the attending physician, wrote: 'I consider that Mr van Gogh is subject to attacks of epilepsy, separated by long intervals, and that it is advisable to place him under long-term observation in the institution.' The real cause of his illness has been the subject of much speculation; we will probably never know how he would be diagnosed today, since the necessary details are lacking. Vincent's illness meant that he would suddenly suffer an 'attack' that lasted days or even weeks. Between May 1889 and May 1890, he had four such attacks, which left him in a state of complete mental derangement. He had no idea what he was doing and had self-destructive tendencies (such as eating dirt and paint), and religious delusions. After these episodes he was downcast and lacked the will to live, and it took a long time for him to find his balance.

In spite of his shaky mental health and his limited field of action, Van Gogh made a number of astonishingly strong works during his first months in Saint-Rémy. Abandoning extremes of colour, he was now preoccupied with the phenomenon of 'style': 'when the thing depicted and the manner of depicting it are in accord, the thing has style and quality' (779). A picture dating from this period, *Starry Night*, was one of his most thoroughgoing experiments in this respect, although later he admitted that he had gone too far in his striving for stylization. He realized that an overly systematic approach to line and brushstroke jarred with the demand he placed on all art, namely that the artist had to empathize with his subject, to feel it through and through, in order to endow the artwork with a deeply personal quality.

In the autumn of 1889 a remarkable exchange of letters developed between Van Gogh, Gauguin and Bernard. The main issue was religious art. Van Gogh's friends had arrived at a synthetic notion of the image, which combined elements in ways and proportions that were not always 'realistic'. They created, for example, modern biblical scenes, based in part on the religious painting of previous centuries. Van Gogh had nothing good to say about it. He found it impersonal and unsound. 'Because I adore the true, the possible' (822): reality was the starting point; the art of today should not rely

on an outdated idiom, but invent a new one. Heated discussions of this kind put Van Gogh in great danger of losing himself.

Meanwhile a lot had changed in Theo's life. Soon after he married Jo, in April 1889, she became pregnant. For Vincent this news was both joyful and worrying, because Theo now bore an even greater burden, and might begin to think of Vincent as a millstone around his neck. It was precisely at this time that Vincent tried to strengthen the ties with his family in the Netherlands. Since leaving Paris, he had been corresponding with his sister Willemien, but now he occasionally wrote to his mother as well. He fell back on old values and certainties, and reread William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

In January 1890, while working on *Almond Blossom*, intended as a present for his future nephew, Van Gogh had another attack of his illness (the third in Saint-Rémy). Afterwards, as he began to recover, he received in the mail the birth announcement of Vincent Willem van Gogh, who had been born on 31 January 1890. He was not particularly pleased that the baby was named after him, and suggested – too late – that the boy should be named Theo anyway, after his father and grandfather.

Van Gogh suffered another attack, between February and March; in March Theo met Paul Gachet, a doctor who lived in Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, whom Pissarro had recommended. Theo believed he could help Vincent, and encouraged his brother to see him.

## **Arles, Wednesday, 2 January 1889**

Vincent van Gogh and Félix Rey to Theo van Gogh (letter 728)

Arles, 2 January 1889

My dear Theo,

In order to reassure you completely on my account I'm writing you these few words in the office of Mr Rey, the house physician, whom you saw yourself. I'll stay here at the hospital for another few days — then I dare plan to return home very calmly. Now I ask just one thing of you, not to worry, for that would cause me one worry TOO MANY.

Now let's talk about our friend Gauguin, did I terrify him? In short, why doesn't he give me a sign of life? He must have left with you.



Besides, he needed to see Paris again, and perhaps he'll feel more at home in Paris than here. *Tell Gauguin to write to me*, and that I'm still thinking of him.

Good handshake, I've read and re-read your letter about the meeting with the Bongers. It's perfect. As for me, I'm content to remain as I am. Once again, good handshake to you and Gauguin.

Ever yours  
Vincent

Write to me, still same address, 2 place Lamartine.

[*Continued by Félix Rey*]

Sir –

I shall add a few words to your brother's letter to reassure you, in my turn, on his account.

I am happy to tell you that my predictions have been borne out, and that this over-excitement was only fleeting. I strongly believe that he will have recovered in a few days' time.

I very much wanted him to write to you himself, to give you a better account of his condition.

I have had him brought down to my office to talk a little. It will entertain me and do him good.

With my sincerest regards.

Rey F.

**Arles, Friday, 4 January 1889**

To Paul Gauguin (letter 730)

My dear friend Gauguin

I'm taking advantage of my first trip out of the hospital to write you a few most sincere and profound words of friendship.

I have thought of you a great deal in the hospital, and even in the midst of fever and relative weakness.

Tell me. Was my brother Theo's journey really necessary – my friend? Now at least reassure him completely, and yourself, please. Trust that in fact no evil exists in this best of worlds, where everything is always for the best.

So I want you to give my warm regards to good Schuffenecker –  
to refrain from saying bad things about our poor little yellow house  
until more mature reflection on either side –  
to give my regards to the painters I saw in Paris.  
I wish you prosperity in Paris. With a good handshake

Ever yours,  
Vincent

Roulin has been really kind to me, it was he who had the presence of mind to get me out of there before the others were convinced.

Please reply.

## **Arles, Monday, 21 January 1889**

To Paul Gauguin (letter 739)

My dear friend Gauguin,

Thanks for your letter. Left behind alone on board my little yellow house — as it was perhaps my duty to be the last to remain here anyway — I'm not a little plagued by the friends' departure.

Roulin has had his transfer to Marseille and has just left. It has been touching to see him these last days with little Marcelle, when he made her laugh and bounce on his knees.

His transfer necessitates his separation from his family, and you won't be surprised that as a result the man you and I simultaneously nicknamed 'the passer-by' one evening had a very heavy heart. Now so did I, witnessing that and other heart-breaking things.

His voice as he sang for his child took on a strange timbre in which there was a hint of a woman rocking a cradle or a distressed wet-nurse, and then another sound of bronze, like a clarion from France.

Now I feel remorse at having perhaps, I who so insisted that you should stay here to await events and gave you so many good reasons for doing so,

now I feel remorse at having indeed perhaps prompted your departure — unless, however, that departure was premeditated beforehand? And that then it was perhaps up to me to show that I still had the right to be kept frankly *au courant*.

Whatever the case, I hope we like each other enough to be able to begin again if need be, if penury, alas ever-present for us artists without capital, should necessitate such a measure.

You talk to me in your letter about a canvas of mine, the sunflowers with a yellow background — to say that it would give you some pleasure to receive it. I don't think that you've made a bad choice — if Jeannin has the peony, Quost the hollyhock, I indeed, before others, have taken the sunflower.

I think that I'll begin by returning what belongs to you, making it plain that it's my intention, after what has happened, to contest categorically your right to the canvas in question. But as I commend your intelligence in the choice of that canvas I'll make an effort to paint two of them, exactly the same. In which case it might be done once and for all and thus settled amicably, so that you could have your own all the same.

Today I made a fresh start on the canvas I had painted of Mrs Roulin, the one which had remained in a vague state as regards the hands because of my accident. As an arrangement of colours: the reds moving through to pure oranges, intensifying even more in the flesh tones up to the chromes, passing into the pinks and marrying with the olive and Veronese greens. As an Impressionist arrangement of colours, I've never devised anything better.

And I believe that if one placed this canvas just as it is in a boat, even one of Icelandic fishermen, there would be some who would feel the lullaby in it. Ah! my dear friend, to make of painting what the music of Berlioz and Wagner has been before us... a consolatory art for distressed hearts! There are as yet only a few who feel it as you and I do!!!

My brother understands you well, and when he tells me that you're a kind of unfortunate like me, then that indeed proves that he understands us.

I'll send you your things, but at times weakness overcomes me again, and then I can't even make the gesture of sending you back your things. I'll pluck up the courage in a few days. And the '*fencing masks and gloves*' (make the very least possible use of less childish engines of war), those terrible engines of war will wait until then. I now write to you very calmly, but I haven't yet been able to pack up all the rest.

In my mental or nervous fever or madness, I don't know quite what to say or how to name it, my thoughts sailed over many seas. I even dreamed of the Dutch ghost ship and the Horla, and it seems that I sang then, I who can't sing on other occasions, to be precise an old wet-nurse's song while thinking of what the cradle-rocker sang as she rocked the sailors and whom I had sought in an arrangement of colours before falling ill. Not knowing the music of *Berlioz*. A heartfelt handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

It will please me greatly if you write to me again before long. Have you read *Tartarin in full* by now? The imagination of the south creates pals, doesn't it, and between us we always have friendship.

Have you yet read and re-read *Uncle Tom's cabin* by Beecher Stowe? It's perhaps not very well written in the literary sense. Have you read *Germinie Lacerteux* yet?

## **Arles, Monday, 28 January 1889**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 743)

My dear Theo,

Just a few words to tell you that I'm getting along so-so as regards my health and work.

Which I already find astonishing when I compare my state today with that of a month ago. I well knew that one could break one's arms and legs before, and that then afterwards that could get better but I didn't know that one could break one's brain and that afterwards that got better too.

I still have a certain 'what's the good of getting better' feeling in the astonishment that an ongoing recovery causes me, which I wasn't in a state to dare rely upon.

When you visited I think you must have noticed in Gauguin's room the two no. 30 canvases of the sunflowers. I've just put the finishing touches to the absolutely equivalent and identical repetitions. I think I've already told you that in addition I have a canvas of a *Berceuse*, the very same one I was

working on when my illness came and interrupted me. Today I also have 2 versions of this one.

On the subject of that canvas, I've just said to Gauguin that as he and I talked about the Icelandic fishermen and their melancholy isolation, exposed to all the dangers, alone on the sad sea, I've just said to Gauguin about it that, following these intimate conversations, the idea came to me to paint such a picture that sailors, at once children and martyrs, seeing it in the cabin of a boat of Icelandic fishermen, would experience a feeling of being rocked, reminding them of their own lullabies. Now it looks, you could say, like a chromolithograph from a penny bazaar. A woman dressed in green with orange hair stands out against a green background with pink flowers. Now these discordant sharps of garish pink, garish orange, garish green, are toned down by flats of reds and greens. I can imagine these canvases precisely between those of the sunflowers – which thus form standard lamps or candelabra at the sides, of the same size; and thus the whole is composed of 7 or 9 canvases.

(I'd like to make another repetition for Holland if I can get the model again.)

As it's still winter, listen. Let me quietly continue my work, if it's that of a madman, well, too bad. Then I can't do anything about it.

However, the unbearable hallucinations have stopped for now, reducing themselves to a simple nightmare on account of taking potassium bromide, I think.

It's still impossible for me to deal with this question of money in detail, but I want to deal with it in detail all the same, and I'm working furiously from morning till night to prove to you (unless my work is yet another hallucination), to prove to you that really, truly, we're following in Monticelli's track here and, what's more, that we have a light on our way and a lamp before our feet in the powerful work of Bruyas of Montpellier, who has done so much to create a school in the south.

Only don't be absolutely too amazed if, in the course of the coming month, I would be obliged to ask you for the month in full, and even the relative extra included.

After all, it's only right if in these productive times when I expend all my vital warmth I should insist on what is necessary to take a few precautions. The difference in expenditure is certainly not excessive on my part, not even in cases like that. And once again, either lock me up in a



madhouse straightaway, I won't resist if I'm wrong, or let me work with all my strength, while taking the precautions I mention.

If I'm not mad the time will come when I'll send you what I've promised you from the beginning. Now, these paintings may perhaps be fated for dispersal, but when you, for one, see the whole of what I want, you will, I dare hope, receive a consolatory impression from it.

You saw, as I did, a part of the Faure collection file past in the little window of a framer's shop in rue Lafitte, didn't you? You saw, as I did, that this slow procession of canvases that were previously despised was strangely interesting.

Good. My great desire would be that sooner or later you should have a series of canvases from me that could also file past in that exact same shop window.

Now, in continuing the furious work this February and March I hope I'll have finished the calm repetitions of a number of studies I did last year. And these, together with certain canvases of mine that you already have, such as the harvest and the white orchard, will form quite a firm base. During this same time, so no later than March, we can settle what has to be settled on the occasion of your marriage.

But although I'll work during February and March, I'll consider myself to be still ill, and I tell you in advance that in these two months I may have to take 250 a month from the year's allowance.

You'll perhaps understand that what would reassure me in some way regarding my illness and the possibility of a relapse would be to see that Gauguin and I didn't exhaust our brains for nothing at least, but that good canvases result from it. And I dare hope that one day you'll see that in remaining upright and calm now, precisely on the question of money – it will be impossible later on to have acted badly towards the Goupils. If indirectly I've eaten some of their bread, certainly through you as an intermediary –

Directly I will then retain my integrity.

So, far from still remaining awkward with each other almost all the time because of that, we can feel like brothers again after that has been sorted out. You'll have been poor all the time to feed me, but I'll return the money or turn up my toes.

Now your wife will come, who has a good heart, to make us old fellows feel a bit younger again.

But this I believe, that you and I will have successors in business, and that precisely at the moment when the family abandoned us to our own resources, financially speaking, it will again be we who haven't flinched.

My word, may the crisis come after that... Am I wrong about that, then?

Come on, as long as the present earth lasts there will be artists and picture dealers, especially those who are apostles at the same time, like you. And if ever we're comfortably off, even while perhaps being old Jewish smokers, at least we'll have worked by forging straight ahead and won't have forgotten the things of the heart that much, even though we have calculated a little.

What I tell you is true: if it isn't absolutely necessary to shut me away in a madhouse then I'm still good for paying what I can be considered to owe, at least in goods.

Then, my dear brother, we have 89. The whole of France shivered at it and so did we old Dutchmen, with the same heart.

Beware of 93, you may perhaps tell me.

Alas there's some truth in that, and that being the case let's stay with the paintings.

In conclusion I must also tell you that the chief inspector of police came yesterday to see me, in a very friendly way. He told me as he shook my hand that if ever I had need of him I could consult him as *a friend*. To which I'm a long way from saying no, and I may soon be in precisely that case if difficulties were to arise for the house. I'm waiting for the moment to come to pay my month's rent to interrogate the manager or the owner face to face.

But to chuck me out they'd more likely get a kick in the backside, on this occasion at least. What can you say, we've gone all-out for the Impressionists, now as regards myself I'm trying to finish the canvases which will indubitably guarantee my little place that I've taken among them.

Ah, the future of that... but from the moment when *père* Pangloss assures us that everything is always for the best in the best of worlds – can we doubt it?

My letter has become longer than I intended, it matters little – the main thing is that I ask categorically for two months' work before settling what will need to be settled at the time of your marriage.

Afterwards, you and your wife will set up a commercial firm for several generations in the renewal. You won't have it easy. And once that's sorted

out I ask only a place as an employed painter as long as there's enough to pay for one.

As a matter of fact, work distracts me. And I *must* have distractions — yesterday I went to the Folies Arlésiennes, the budding theatre here — it was the first time I've slept without a serious nightmare. They were performing — (it was a Provençal literary society) what they call a Noel or Pastourale, a remnant of Christian theatre of the Middle Ages. It was very studied and it must have cost them some money.

Naturally it depicted the birth of Christ, intermingled with the burlesque story of a family of astounded Provençal peasants. Good — what was amazing, like a Rembrandt etching — was the old peasant woman, just the sort of woman Mrs Tanguy would be, with a head of flint or gun flint, false, treacherous, mad, all that could be seen previously in the play. Now that woman, in the play, brought before the mystic crib — in her quavering voice began to sing and then her voice changed, changed from witch to angel and from the voice of an angel into the voice of a child and then the answer by another voice, this one firm and warmly vibrant, a woman's voice, behind the scenes.

That was amazing, amazing. I tell you, the so-called 'Félibres' had anyway spared themselves neither trouble nor expense.

As for me, with this little country here I have no need at all to go to the tropics.

I believe and will always believe in the art to be created in the tropics, and I believe it will be marvellous, but well, personally I'm too old and (especially if I get myself a papier-mâché ear) too jerry-built to go there.

Will Gauguin do it? It isn't necessary. For if it must be done it will be done all on its own.

We are merely links in the chain.

At the bottom of our hearts good old Gauguin and I understand each other, and if we're a bit mad, so be it, aren't we also a little sufficiently deeply artistic to contradict anxieties in that regard by what we say with the brush?

Perhaps everyone will one day have neurosis, the Horla, St Vitus's Dance or something else.

But doesn't the antidote exist? In Delacroix, in Berlioz and Wagner? And really, our artistic madness which all the rest of us have, I don't say that I especially haven't been struck to the marrow by it. But I say and will

maintain that our antidotes and consolations can, with a little good will, be considered as amply prevalent. See Puvis de Chavannes' Hope.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **Arles, Wednesday, 10 April 1889**

To Paul Signac (letter 756)

My dear friend Signac,

Thanks very much for your postcard, which gives me news of you. As for my brother not having replied to your letter yet, I'm inclined to believe that it's not his fault. I've also been without news of him for a fortnight. It's because he's in Holland, where he's getting married one of these days. Now, while not denying the advantages of a marriage in the very least, once it has been done and one is quietly set up in one's home, the funereal pomp of the reception &c., the lamentable congratulations of two families (even civilized) at the same time, not to mention the fortuitous appearances in those pharmacist's jars where antediluvian civil or religious magistrates sit – my word – isn't there good reason to pity the poor unfortunate obliged to present himself armed with the requisite papers in the places where, with a ferocity unequalled by the cruellest cannibals, you're married alive on the low heat of the aforementioned funereal receptions.

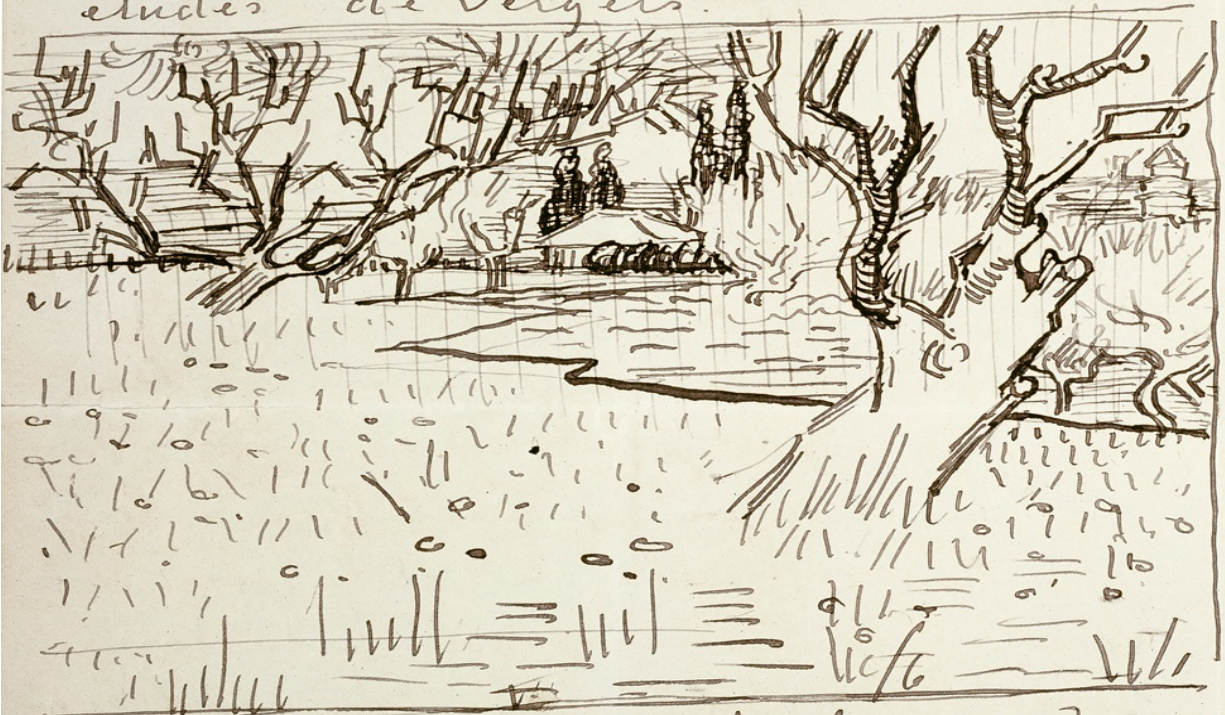
I remain much obliged to you for your most friendly and beneficial visit, which considerably contributed to cheering me up.

I am well now and I'm working in the hospital or its surroundings. Thus I've just brought back two studies of orchards.

[[sketch A](#)] Here's a hasty croquis of them – the largest is a poor green countryside with little cottages, blue line of the Alpilles, white and blue sky. The foreground, enclosures with reed hedges where little peach trees are in blossom – everything there is *small*, the gardens, the fields, the gardens, the trees, even those mountains, as in certain Japanese landscapes, that's why this subject attracted me.



Je vous demeure bien obligé de votre  
 amicale et bienfaisante visite qui  
 m'a considérablement contribué à me  
 remonter le moral  
 Je vais bien maintenant et je travaille  
 à l'hospice ou dans les environs.  
 Ainsi je viens de rapporter deux  
 études de vergers.



En voici croquis habit - le plus grand  
 est une parure campagne verte à petits mas  
 ligne bleue des aînes ciel blanc à bleu  
 de devant <sup>des clois</sup> <sup>aux</sup> haies de roseaux ou de petits  
 pechers sont en fleur - tout y est petit les jardins  
 les champs les jardins les arbres même ces montagnes  
 comme dans certains paysages japonais c'est pourquoi  
 ce motif m'attirait

L'autre paysage est presque tout vert avec un peu  
 de lilas et de gres - par un jour pluvieux

Bien aise ~~d'après~~ de ce que vous dites que vous vous êtes  
<sup>l'été</sup> et sera désireux d'avoir encore de vos nouvelles  
<sup>comment</sup> le travail marche, comment est le caractère de ces  
 parages là.



756A. *Orchard in blossom with a view of Arles*

The other landscape is almost all green with a little lilac and grey – on a rainy day.

Very pleased to hear you say that you've settled down, and will very much wish to have more news of you. How is work going, what is the character of those parts? [[sketch B](#)]



Since then my mind has returned yet more to the normal state, for the time being I don't ask for better, provided it lasts. That will depend above all on a very sober regime.

For the first few months, at least, I plan to go on staying here. I've rented an apartment consisting of two very small rooms. But at times it isn't completely convenient for me to start living again, for I still have inner despairs of quite a large calibre.

My word, these anxieties... who can live in modern life without catching his share of them?

The best consolation, if not the only remedy, is, it still seems to me, profound friendships, even if these have the disadvantage of anchoring us in life more solidly than may appear desirable to us in the days of great suffering.

Thank you again for your visit, which gave me so much pleasure.

Good handshake in thought.

Yours truly,  
Vincent

Address until end of April, place Lamartine 2, Arles.

## **Arles, between about Sunday, 28 April and Thursday, 2 May 1889**

To Willemien van Gogh (letter 764)

My dear sister,

Your kind letter really touched me, especially since it tells me that you've returned to care for Mrs du Quesne.

Certainly cancer is a terrible illness, as for me, I always shiver when I see a case – and it isn't rare in the south, although often it's not the real incurable, mortal cancer but cancerous abscesses from which one sometimes recovers. Whatever the case, you're very brave, my sister, not to recoil before these Gethsemanes. And I feel less brave than you when I think of

these things, feeling awkward, heavy and clumsy in them. We have, if my memory serves, a Dutch proverb to this effect: they aren't the worst fruits that wasps gnaw at...

This leads me straight to what I wanted to say, ivy loves the old lopped willows each spring, ivy loves the trunk of the old oak tree – and so cancer, that mysterious plant, attaches itself so often to people whose lives were nothing but ardent love and devotion. So, however terrible the mystery of these pains may be, the horror of them is sacred, and in them there might indeed be a gentle, heartbreaking thing, just as we see the green moss in abundance on the old thatched roof. However, I don't know anything about it – I have no right to assert anything.

Not very far from here there's a very, very, very ancient tomb, more ancient than Christ, on which this is inscribed, 'Blessed be Thebe, daughter of Telhui, priestess of Osiris, who never complained about anyone.' I couldn't help thinking of that when you told me in your previous letter that the sick lady you're caring for didn't complain.

Mother must be pleased with Theo's marriage, and he writes to me that she looks as if she's getting younger. That pleases me greatly. Now he too is very pleased with his matrimonial experiences, and is considerably reassured.

He has so few illusions about it, having to a rare degree the strength of character to take things as they are without making pronouncements about good and evil. In which he's quite right, for what do we know of what we do?

As for me, I'm going for at least 3 months into an asylum at St-Rémy, not far from here.

In all I've had 4 big crises in which I hadn't the slightest idea of what I said, wanted, did.

Not counting that I fainted 3 times previously without plausible reason, and not retaining the least memory of what I felt then.

Ah well, that's quite serious, although I'm much calmer since then, and physically I'm perfectly well. And I still feel incapable of taking a studio again. I'm working though, and have just done two paintings of the hospital. One is a ward, a very long ward with the rows of beds with white curtains where a few figures of patients are moving.

The walls, the ceiling with the large beams, everything is white in a lilac white or green white. Here and there a window with a pink or bright

green curtain.

The floor tiled with red bricks. At the far end a door surmounted by a crucifix.

It's very, very simple. And then, as a pendant, the inner courtyard. It's an arcaded gallery like in Arab buildings, whitewashed. In front of these galleries an ancient garden with a pond in the middle and 8 beds of flowers, forget-me-nots, Christmas roses, anemones, buttercups, wallflowers, daisies &c.

And beneath the gallery, orange trees and oleanders. So it's a painting chock-full of flowers and springtime greenery. However, three black, sad tree-trunks cross it like snakes, and in the foreground four large sad, dark box bushes.

The people here probably don't see much in it, but however it has always been so much my desire to paint for those who don't know the artistic side of a painting.

What shall I say to you, you don't know the reasonings of good *père* Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*, nor Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. These are books from man to man, and I don't know if women understand that. But the memory of that often sustains me in the uncomfortable and unenviable hours and days or nights.

I've re-read Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom* with *EXTREME attention* precisely because it's a woman's book, written, she says, while making soup for her children, and then also with extreme attention C. Dickens's *Christmas Tales*.

I read little so as to think about it more. It's very likely that I have a lot more to suffer. And that doesn't suit me at all, to tell you the truth, for I wouldn't wish for a martyr's career in any circumstances.

For I've always sought something *other* than the heroism I don't have, which I certainly admire in others but which, I repeat, I do *not* believe to be my duty or my ideal.

I haven't re-read those excellent books by Renan but how often I think of them here, where we have the olive trees and other characteristic plants and the blue sky. Ah, how right Renan is and what a fine work his is, to speak to us in a French like no other person speaks. A French in which, *in the sound of the words*, there's the blue sky and the gentle rustling of the olive trees and a thousand *true* and *explanatory* things in short that turn his history into a resurrection. It's one of the saddest things I know, the



prejudices of people who through bias oppose so many good and beautiful things that have been created in our time. Ah, the eternal ‘*ignorance*’, the eternal ‘misunderstandings’, and how much good it then does to happen upon words that are truly Serene... Blessed be Thebe – daughter of Telhui – priestess of Osiris – who never complained about anyone.

For myself, I quite often worry that my life hasn’t been calm enough, all these disappointments, annoyances, changes mean that I don’t develop naturally and in full in my artistic career.

‘A rolling stone gathers no moss’

they say, don’t they?

But what does that matter if, as rightly the above-mentioned *père* Pangloss alone proves, ‘everything is always for the best in the best of worlds’.

Last year I did about ten or a dozen orchards in blossom and this year I have only four, so work isn’t going with much gusto.

If you have the *Drône* book you speak of I’d very much like to read it, but do me the pleasure of *not* buying it especially for me at the moment. I’ve seen some very interesting nuns here, the majority of the priests seem to me to be in a sad state. Religion has frightened me so much for so many years now. For example, do you happen to know that *love* perhaps doesn’t exist exactly as one imagines it – the junior doctor here, the worthiest man one could possibly imagine, the most dedicated, the most valiant, a warm, manly heart, sometimes amuses himself mystifying the little women by telling them that love is also a microbe. Although then the little women, and even a few men, let out loud shouts, he doesn’t care at all and is imperturbable on that point.

As for kissing and all the rest that it pleases us to add to it, that’s just a natural kind of act like drinking a glass of water or eating a piece of bread. Certainly it’s quite indispensable to kiss, otherwise serious disorders arise.

Now must cerebral sympathies always go with or without what precedes. Why regulate all that, eh, what’s the use?

For myself I’m not opposed to love being a microbe, and even so that wouldn’t prevent me at all from feeling things such as respect before the pains of cancer for example.

And do you see, the doctors of whom you say, sometimes they can’t do very much (which I leave you free to say as much as you consider right) –

very well – do you know what they can do all the same – they give you a more cordial handshake, gentler than many other hands, and their presence can really be very pleasant and reassuring sometimes.

There you are, I'm letting myself go on and on. Yet often I can't write two lines, and I really fear that my ideas may be futile or incoherent this time too.

Only I wanted to write to you in any case while you were there. I can't precisely describe what the thing I have is like, there are terrible fits of anxiety sometimes – without any apparent cause – or then again a feeling of emptiness and fatigue in the mind. I consider the whole rather as a simple accident, no doubt a large part of it is my fault, and from time to time I have fits of melancholy, atrocious remorse, but you see, when that's going to discourage me completely and make me gloomy, I'm not exactly embarrassed to say that remorse and fault are possibly microbes too, just like love.

Every day I take the remedy that the incomparable Dickens prescribes against suicide. It consists of a glass of wine, a piece of bread and cheese and a pipe of tobacco. It isn't complicated, you'll tell me, and you don't think that my melancholy comes close to that place, however at moments – ah but...

Anyway, it isn't always pleasant, but I try not to forget completely how to jest, I try to avoid everything that might relate to heroism and martyrdom, in short I try not to take lugubrious things lugubriously.

Now I wish you good-night, and my respects to your patient, although I don't know her.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I don't know if Lies is in Soesterberg at the moment, if she's there, kind regards from me.

**Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Thursday,  
23 May 1889**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 776)

My dear Theo,

Your letter which I've just received gives me great pleasure. You tell me that J.H. Weissenbruch has two paintings in the exhibition — but I thought he was dead — am I mistaken? He certainly is one hell of an artist and a good man, with a big heart too.


What you say about the Berceuse gives me pleasure; it's very true that the common people, who buy themselves chromos and listen with sentimentality to barrel organs, are vaguely in the right and perhaps more sincere than certain men-about-town who go to the Salon.

Gauguin, if he'll accept it, you shall give him a version of the Berceuse that wasn't mounted on a stretching frame, and to Bernard too, as a token of friendship.

But if Gauguin wants sunflowers it's only absolutely fair that he gives you something that you like as much in exchange. Gauguin himself above all liked the sunflowers later, when he had seen them for a long time.

You must know, too, that if you put them in this order: [[sketch A](#)] that is, the Berceuse in the middle and the two canvases of the sunflowers to the right and the left, this forms a sort of triptych. And then the yellow and orange tones of the head take on more brilliance through the proximity of the yellow shutters. And then you will understand that what I was writing to you about it, that my idea had been to make a decoration like one for the far end of a cabin on a ship, for example. Then as the size gets bigger, the summary execution gets its *raison d'être*. The middle frame is then the red one. And the two sunflowers that go with it are those surrounded by strips of wood.

mais si Ganguen veut de la monnaie ce n'est  
 qu'absolument comme de justy qu'il l'~~donne~~  
 en échange quelque chose que le ~~donneur~~  
 Ganguen lui-même à lui-même les tournaioles  
 plus tard lorsqu'il les aura vu long temps.  
 Il faut encore savoir que si la berceuse dans ce  
 sens ci : soit la berceuse au milieu et les deux  
 tournaioles  
 tournaioles  
 à droite et  
 gauche du  
 point  
 comme  
 un triplé.



Et alors les deux  
 jaunes tournaioles  
 de la tête  
 prennent plus  
 d'éclat que le  
 tournaioles des  
 volatiles jaunes.

Et alors tu comprendras ce que je t'en écris que  
 mon idée avait été de faire une décoration comme  
 serait par exemple pour le fond d'un cabine dans  
 un navire. Alors le format s'élargissant <sup>en largeur</sup> la facture  
 prend sa raison d'être de cadre du milieu est alors  
 le rouge. Et les deux tournaioles qui vont avec sont  
 ceux entourés de baguettes.  
 Tu vois que cet encadrement de simples lettres

You see that this framing of simple laths does quite well, and a frame like that costs only very little. It would be perhaps good to frame the green and red vineyards, the sower and the furrows and the interior of the bedroom with them too.

[[\*sketch B\*](#)] Here's a new no. 30 canvas, commonplace again, like one of those chromos from a penny bazaar that depict eternal nests of greenery for lovers.





Voici une nouvelle toile  
de 30 encore banale  
comme un chromo de  
bazar qui représentent  
les éléments nuds de verdure  
pour les amoureux  
Des gros troncs d'arbres  
couverts de lierre le  
sol également couvert  
de lierre & de pervenche  
un band de pierre et  
un buisson de roses  
pâles à l'ombre froide  
Sur l'avant plan quelques  
plantes à calice blanc  
C'est vert violet et  
rose

Il ne s'agit - ce qui manque malheureusement aux  
chromos de bazar et aux œuvres de barbare d'y mettre  
du style.

Depuis que je suis ici le jardin desolé planté de grands pins  
sous lesquels croît haute et mal entretenue une herbe  
~~entremêlée~~ d'ivraies diverses m'a suffi pour travailler et  
je ne suis pas encore sorti dehors.

Cependant le paysage de Remy est très beau et  
peu à peu je vais y ~~faire~~ faire des étapes probablement.  
Mais en restant ici naturellement le médecin a  
mieux pu voir ce que en étant à sera j'ose  
espérer plus rasuré sur ce qu'il peut me laisser  
prendre.

Je l'assure que je suis bien ici et que provisoirement  
je ne vois pas de raison du tout de venir en pension  
à Paris ou environs. J'ai une petite chambre à  
papier gris vert avec deux rideaux vert d'eau à dessins  
de roses très pâles ravivés de minces traits de rouge sang.  
Ces rideaux probablement des restes d'un riche ruiné et  
défunct sont fort jolis de dessin. De la même source provient  
probablement un fauteuil très usé recouvert d'une tapisserie  
l'achetée à la Dragon à la Monticelli brun rouge rose  
blanc crème noir bleu myosotis et vert bouteille  
à travers la fenêtre barrière de fer j'aperçois un carré  
de blé dans un enclos une perspective à la B. V. Guyon  
au dessus de laquelle ~~les~~ les matin je vois le soleil se  
lever dans sa gloire.

Thick tree-trunks covered with ivy, the ground also covered with ivy and periwinkle, a stone bench and a bush of roses, blanched in the cold shadow. In the foreground a few plants with white calyxes. It's green, violet and pink.

It's just a question — which is unfortunately lacking in chromos from a penny bazaar and barrel organs — of putting in some style.

Since I've been here, the neglected garden planted with tall pines under which grows tall and badly tended grass intermingled with various weeds, has provided me with enough work, and I haven't yet gone outside.

However, the landscape of St-Rémy is very beautiful, and little by little I'm probably going to make trips into it. But staying here as I am, the doctor has naturally been in a better position to see what was wrong, and will, I dare hope, be more reassured that he can let me paint.

I assure you that I'm very well here, and that for the time being I see no reason at all to come and board in Paris or its surroundings. I have a little room with grey-green paper with two water-green curtains with designs of very pale roses enlivened with thin lines of blood-red. These curtains, probably the leftovers of a ruined, deceased rich man, are very pretty in design. Probably from the same source comes a very worn armchair covered with a tapestry flecked in the manner of a Diaz or a Monticelli, red-brown, pink, creamy white, black, forget-me-not blue and bottle green.

Through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of wheat in an enclosure, a perspective in the manner of Van Goyen, above which in the morning I see the sun rise in its glory.

With this — as there are more than 30 empty rooms — I have another room in which to work.

The food is so-so. It smells naturally a little musty, as in a cockroach-ridden restaurant in Paris or a boarding school. As these unfortunates do absolutely nothing (not a book, nothing to distract them but a game of boules and a game of draughts) they have no other daily distraction than to stuff themselves with chickpeas, haricot beans, lentils and other groceries and colonial foodstuffs by the regulated quantities and at fixed times.

As the digestion of these commodities presents certain difficulties, they thus fill their days in a manner as inoffensive as it's cheap. But joking apart, the *fear* of madness passes from me considerably upon seeing from close at hand those who are affected with it, as I may very easily be in the future.

Before I had some repulsion for these beings, and it was something distressing for me to have to reflect that so many people of our profession, Troyon, Marchal, Meryon, Jundt, M. Maris, Monticelli, a host of others, had ended up like that. I wasn't even able to picture them in the least in that state.

Well, now I think of all this without fear, i.e. I find it no more atrocious than if these people had snuffed it of something else, of consumption or syphilis, for example.

These artists, I see them take on their serene bearing again, and do you think it's a small thing to rediscover ancient members of the profession.

Joking apart, that's what I'm profoundly grateful for.

For although there are some who howl or usually rave, here there is *much* true friendship that they have for each other. They say, one must suffer others for the others to suffer us, and other very true reasonings that they thus put into practice. And between ourselves we understand each other very well, I can, for example, chat sometimes with one who doesn't reply except in incoherent sounds, because he isn't afraid of me.

If someone has some crisis the others look after him, and intervene so that he doesn't harm himself.

The same for those who have the mania of often getting angry. Old regulars of the menagerie run up and separate the fighters, if there is a fight.

It's true that there are some who are in a more serious condition, whether they be filthy, or dangerous. These are in another courtyard. Now I take a bath twice a week, and stay in it for 2 hours, then my stomach is infinitely better than a year ago, so I only have to continue, as far as I know. I think I'll spend less here than elsewhere, since here I still have work on my plate, for nature is beautiful.

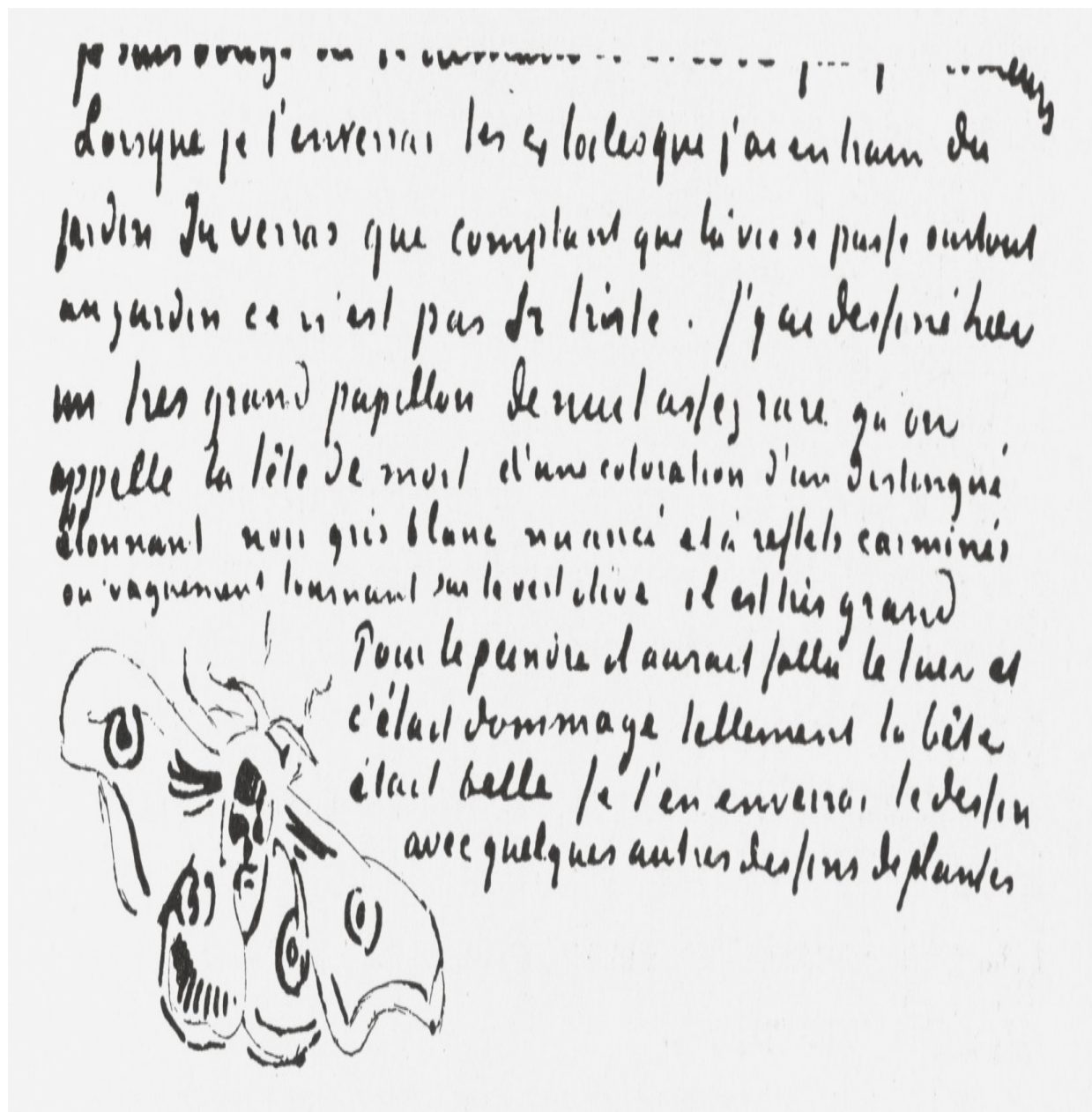
My hope would be that at the end of a year I'll know better than now what I can do and what I want. Then, little by little, an idea will come to me for beginning again. Coming back to Paris or anywhere at the moment doesn't appeal to me at all, I feel that I'm in the right place here. In my opinion, what most of those who have been here for years are suffering from is an extreme sluggishness. Now, my work will preserve me from that to a certain extent.

The room where we stay on rainy days is like a 3rd-class waiting room in some stagnant village, all the more so since there are honourable madmen



who always wear a hat, spectacles and travelling clothes and carry a cane, almost like at the seaside, and who represent the passengers there.

I'm obliged to ask you for some more colours, and especially some canvas. When I send you the 4 canvases of the garden I have on the go you'll see that, considering that life happens above all in the garden, it isn't so sad. Yesterday I drew a very large, rather rare night moth there which is called the death's head, its coloration astonishingly distinguished: black, grey, white, shaded, and with glints of carmine or vaguely tending towards olive green; it's very big. [[sketch C](#)] To paint it I would have had to kill it, and that would have been a shame since the animal was so beautiful. I'll send you the drawing of it with a few other drawings of plants.



776C. Giant peacock moth

You could take the canvases which are dry enough at Tanguy's or at your place off the stretching frames and then put the new ones you consider worthy of it onto these stretching frames. Gauguin must be able to give you the address of a liner for the Bedroom who won't be expensive. This I *imagine* must be a 5-franc restoration, if it's more then don't have it done, I don't think that Gauguin paid more when he quite often had canvases of his own, Cézanne or Pissarro lined.



Speaking of my condition, I'm still so grateful for yet another thing. I observe in others that, like me, they too have heard sounds and strange voices during their crises, that things also appeared to change before their eyes. And that softens the horror that I retained at first of the crisis I had, and which when it comes to you unexpectedly, cannot but frighten you beyond measure. Once one knows that it's part of the illness one takes it like other things. Had I not seen other mad people at close hand I wouldn't have been able to rid myself of thinking about it all the time. For the sufferings of anguish aren't funny when you're caught in a crisis. Most epileptics bite their tongues and injure them. Rey told me that he had known a case where someone had injured his ear as I did, and I believe I've heard a doctor here who came to see me with the director say that he too had seen it before. I dare to believe that once one knows what it is, once one is aware of one's state and of possibly being subject to crises, that then one can do something about it oneself so as not to be caught so much unawares by the anguish or the terror. Now, this has been diminishing for 5 months, I have good hope of getting over it, or at least of not having crises of such force. There's one person here who has been shouting and *always* talking, like me, for a fortnight, he thinks he hears voices and words in the echo of the corridors, probably because the auditory nerve is sick and too sensitive, and with me it was both the sight and the hearing at the same time which, according to what Rey said one day, is usual at the beginning of epilepsy.

Now the shock had been such that it disgusted me even to move, and nothing would have been so agreeable to me as never to wake up again. At present this *horror of life* is already less pronounced, and the melancholy less acute. But I still have absolutely no *will*, hardly any desires or none, and everything that has to do with ordinary life, the desire for example to see friends again, about whom I think however, almost nil. That's why I'm not yet at the point where I ought to leave here soon, I would still have melancholy for everything. And it's even only in these very last days that the repulsion for life has changed quite radically. There's still a way to go from there to will and action.

It's a shame that you yourself are still condemned to Paris, and that you never see the countryside other than that around Paris.

I think that it's no more unfortunate for me to be in the company where I am than for you always the fateful things at Goupil & Cie. From that point of view we're quite equal. For only in part can you act in accordance with

your ideas. Since, however, we have once got used to these inconveniences, it becomes second nature.

I think that although the paintings cost canvas, paint &c., at the end of the month, however, it's more advantageous to spend a little more thus, and to make them with what I've learned in total, than to abandon them while one would have to pay for board and lodging all the same anyway. And that's why I'm making them. So this month I have 4 no. 30 canvases and two or three drawings.

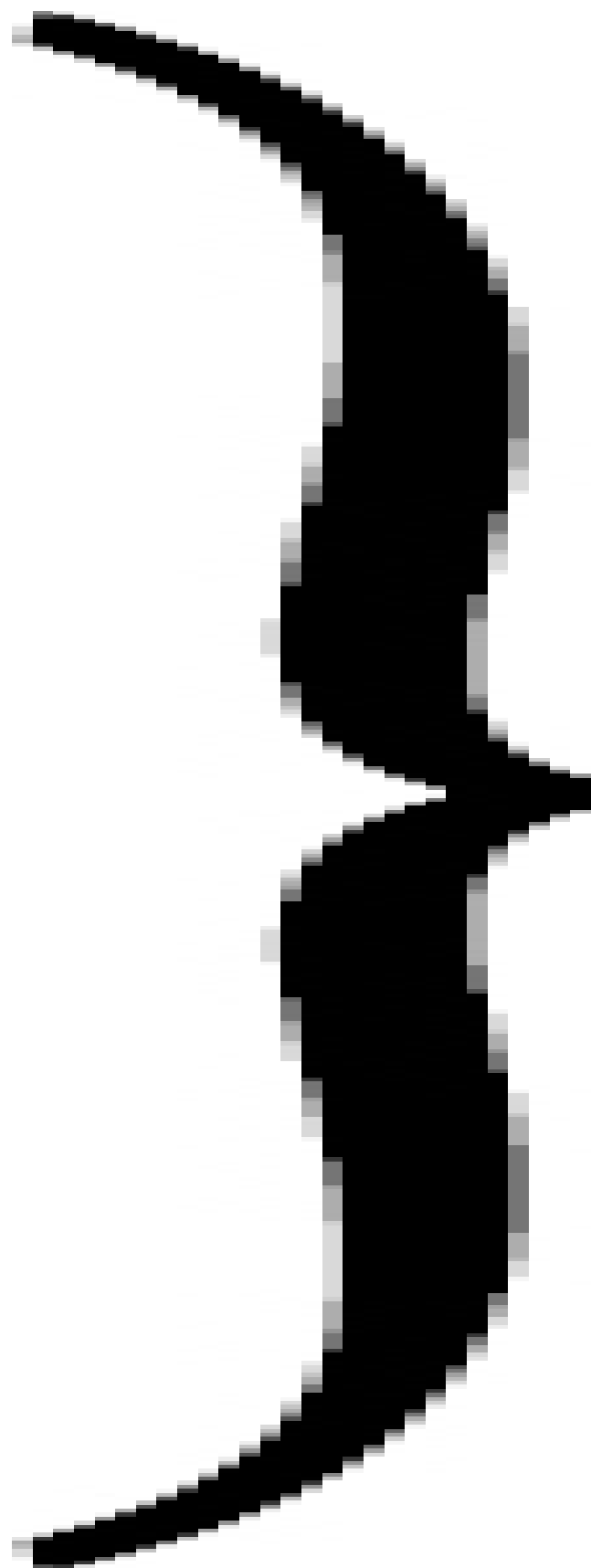
But no matter what one does, the question of money is always there like the enemy before the troops, and one can't deny it or forget it.

I retain my duties in that respect as much as anyone. And perhaps some day I'll be in a position to repay all that I've spent, because I consider that what I've spent is, if not taken from you at least taken from the family, so consequently I've produced paintings and I'll do more. That is to act as you too act yourself. If I had private means, perhaps my mind would be freer to do art for art's sake, now I content myself with believing that in working assiduously even so, without thinking of it one perhaps makes some progress.

Here are the colours I would need

3 emerald green  
2 cobalt  
1 ultramarine  
1 orange lead  
6 zinc white  
5 metres canvas

large tubes.



Thanking you for your kind letter, I shake your hand warmly, as well as your wife's.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

## **Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Tuesday, 18 June 1889**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 782)

My dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter of yesterday. I too cannot write as I would wish, but anyway we live in such a disturbed age that there can be no question of having opinions that are firm enough to judge things.

I would have very much liked to know if you now still eat together at the restaurant or if you live at home more. I hope so, for in the long run that must be the best.

As for me, it's going well – you'll understand that after almost half a year now of absolute sobriety in eating, drinking, smoking, with two two-hour baths a week recently, this must clearly calm one down a great deal. So it's going very well, and as regards work, it occupies and distracts me – which I need very much – far from wearing me out.

It gives me great pleasure that Isaäcson found things in my consignment that please him. He and De Haan appear very faithful, which is sufficiently rare these days for it to be worthy of appreciation. And that, as you say, there was another who found something in the yellow and black figure of a woman, that doesn't surprise me, although I think that its merit lies in the model and not in my painting.

I despair of ever finding models. Ah, if I had some from time to time like that one, or like the woman who posed for the *Berceuse*, I'd do something quite different.

I think you did the right thing by not exhibiting paintings of mine at the exhibition by Gauguin and others. There's reason enough for me to abstain from doing so without offending them as long as I'm not cured myself.

For me it's beyond doubt that Gauguin and Bernard have great and real merit.

It's still perfectly understandable, though, that for beings like them, really alive and young, who *must* live and try to carve out their path, it's impossible to turn all their canvases to the wall until it pleases people to admit them somewhere in the official pickle. One causes a stir by exhibiting in the cafés, which I don't say isn't in bad taste. But for myself, I have that crime on my conscience, and to the point of doing it twice, having exhibited at the Tambourin and at avenue de Clichy. Not counting the disturbance caused to 81 virtuous cannibals of the good town of Arles and to their excellent mayor.

So in any case, I am worse and more blameworthy than they are in that regard (causing a stir quite involuntarily, my word).

Young Bernard – according to me – has already made a few absolutely astonishing canvases in which there's a gentleness and something essentially French and candid, of rare quality.

Anyway, neither he nor Gauguin are artists who could look as if they were trying to go to the World Exhibition by the back stairs. You can be sure of that. It's understandable that they *couldn't* keep silent. That the Impressionists' movement has had no unity is what proves that they're less skilled fighters than other artists like Delacroix and Courbet.

At last I have a landscape with olive trees, and also a new study of a starry sky.

Although I haven't seen the latest canvases either by Gauguin or Bernard, I'm fairly sure that these two studies I speak of are comparable in sentiment. When you've seen these two studies for a while, as well as the one of the ivy, I'll perhaps be able to give you, better than in words, an idea of the things Gauguin, Bernard and I sometimes chatted about and that preoccupied us. It's not a return to the romantic or to religious ideas, no. However, by going the way of Delacroix, more than it seems, by colour and a more determined drawing than *trompe-l'oeil* precision, one might express a country nature that is purer than the suburbs, the bars of Paris. One might try to paint human beings who are also more serene and purer than Daumier had before him. But of course following Daumier in the drawing of it. We'll leave aside whether that exists or doesn't exist, but we believe that nature extends beyond St-Ouen.



Perhaps, while reading Zola, we are moved by the sound of the pure French of Renan, for example.

And after all, while Le Chat Noir draws women for us after its own fashion, and above all Forain does so in a masterly way, we do some of our own, less Parisian but no less fond of Paris and its elegances, we try to prove that something else quite different exists.

Gauguin, Bernard or I will all remain there perhaps, and won't overcome but neither will we be overcome. We're perhaps not there for one thing or the other, being there to console or to prepare for more consolatory painting. Isaäcson and De Haan may not succeed either, but in Holland they've felt the need to state that Rembrandt did great painting and not *trompe l'oeil*, they also felt something different.

If you can get the Bedroom lined it's better to have it done *before* sending it to me.

I have no more white at all at all.

You'll give me a lot of pleasure if you write to me again soon. I so often think that after a while you'll find in marriage, I hope, the means to gain new strength, and that a year from now your health will have improved.

What I'd very much like to have here to read from time to time would be a Shakespeare. There's one priced at one shilling, *Dicks' Shilling Shakespeare*, which is complete. There's no shortage of editions, and I think the cheap ones have been changed less than the more expensive ones. In any case I wouldn't want one that cost more than three francs.

Now, whatever is too bad in the consignment, put it completely to one side, pointless to have stuff like that; it may be of use to me later to remind me of things. Whatever is good will show up better by being part of a smaller number of canvases. The rest, if you put them in a corner, flat between two sheets of cardboard with old newspapers between the studies, that's all they're worth.

I'm sending you a roll of drawings.

Handshakes to you, to Jo and to our friends.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

The drawings Hospital in Arles, the weeping tree in the grass, the fields and the olive trees, are a continuation of those from Montmajour from back then. The others are hasty studies done in the garden.

There's no hurry for the Shakespeare, if they don't have an edition like that, it won't take an eternity to have one sent.

Don't be afraid that I would ever venture onto dizzy heights of my own free will, unfortunately, whether we like it or not, we're subject to circumstances and to the illnesses of our time. But with all the precautions I'm now taking, it will be difficult for me to relapse, and I hope that the attacks won't start again.

## **Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Sunday, 14 or Monday, 15 July 1889**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 790)

My dear Theo,

If I'm writing to you again today it's because I'm enclosing a few words that I've written to our friend Gauguin, feeling sufficient calm return to me these last few days for my letter not to be absolutely absurd, it seemed to me. Besides, there's no proof that by over-refining one's scruples of respect or feeling one thereby gains respectfulness or good sense. That being so, it does me good to talk with the pals again, even if at a distance. And you – my dear fellow – how are things, and so write me a few words one of these days – for I can imagine that the emotions which must move the forthcoming father of a family, emotions of which our good father so loved to speak, must be great and of sterling worth in you, as in him, but for the moment are almost impossible for you to express in the rather incoherent mixture of the petty vexations of Paris. Realities of this sort must anyway be like a good gust of the mistral, not very soothing, but health-giving. As for me, it gives me very great pleasure I can assure you, and will contribute greatly to bringing me out of my moral fatigue and perhaps from my listlessness.

Anyway, there's enough to bring back the taste for life a little when I think that I myself am going to be promoted uncle of this boy planned by your wife. I find it quite funny that she's so convinced that it's a boy, but anyway, we'll see.

Anyway, in the meantime I can do nothing but fiddle with my paintings a little. I have one on the go of a moonrise over the same field as the croquis

in the Gauguin letter, but in which stacks replace the wheat. It's dull ochre-yellow and violet. Anyway, you'll see in a while from now.

I also have a new one with ivy on the go. Above all, dear fellow, I beg of you, don't fret or worry or be melancholy on my account, the idea that you would do so, certainly in this necessary and salutary quarantine, would have little justification when we need a slow and patient recovery. If we manage to grasp that, we spare our forces for this winter. I imagine that winter must be quite dismal here, anyway will however have to try and occupy myself. I often imagine that I could retouch a lot of last year's studies from Arles this winter.

Thus, having kept back these past few days a large study of an orchard which was very difficult (it's the same orchard of which you'll find a variation in the consignment, but quite a vague one), I've set to reworking it from memory, and have found a way better to express the harmony of the tones.

Tell me, have you received any drawings from me? I sent you some once, by parcel post, half a dozen, and then later ten or so. If by chance you haven't received them, they must have been at the railway station for days and weeks.

The doctor was telling me about Monticelli, that he had always considered him eccentric, but as for *mad*, he had only been a little that way towards the end. Considering all the miseries of M's last years, is it any surprise that he bowed beneath a weight that was too heavy, and is one right in trying to deduce from that that he failed in his work, artistically speaking? I dare to believe not. There was some very logical calculation about him, and an originality as a painter, so it remains regrettable that one wasn't able to sustain it so as to make its blossoming more complete.

I enclose a croquis of the cicadas from here.

Their song in times of great heat holds the same charm for me as the cricket in the peasant's hearth at home. My dear fellow – let's not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives, and that these we obey without knowing it. If it's still hard for me to regain courage over faults committed and to be committed, which would be my recovery, let's not forget from that moment on that neither our spleens and melancholies nor our feelings of good nature and good sense are our sole guides, and above all not our final custodians, and that if you yourself also find yourself facing hard responsibilities to venture, if not to take, my word let's not be *too*

concerned with each other, while it so happens that life's circumstances in situations so far removed from our youthful conceptions of the life of the artist would render us brothers after all, as being companions in fate in many respects. Things are so closely connected that here one sometimes finds cockroaches in the food as if one were really in Paris, on the other hand it can happen in Paris that you sometimes have a real thought of the fields. It's certainly not much, but it's reassuring anyway. So take your fatherhood as a good fellow from our old heaths would take it, those heaths that remain ineffably dear to us through all the noise, tumult, fog, anguish of the towns, however timid our tenderness may be. That's to say, take your fatherhood there, from your nature as an exile and a foreigner and a poor man, henceforth basing himself with the poor man's instinct on the probability of the real existence of a native country, of a real existence at least of the memory, even while we've forgotten every day. Thus sooner or later we find our fate. But certainly for you, as well as for me, it would be a little hypocritical to forget completely our good humour, the confident sloppiness we had as the poor devils we were as we came and went in that Paris, so strange now – and to place too much weight upon our cares.

Truly, I'm so pleased with the fact that if sometimes there are cockroaches in the food here, in your home there is wife and child.

Besides, it's reassuring that Voltaire, for example, left us free to believe not absolutely all of what we imagine. Thus while sharing your wife's concerns about your health I'm not going so far as to believe what momentarily I was imagining, that worries about me were the cause of your relatively rather long silence in respect of me, although this is so well explained when one thinks of how preoccupying a pregnancy must necessarily be. But it's very good and it's the path where everyone walks in life. More soon, and good handshake to you and to Jo.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

In haste, but didn't want to delay sending the letter for our friend Gauguin, you must have the address.

[[sketch A](#)]





## **Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Monday, 2 September 1889**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 798)

My dear Theo,

Since I wrote to you I'm feeling better, and whilst I don't know if it'll last I don't want to wait any longer to write to you again.

Thanks once again for that beautiful etching after Rembrandt. I'd very much like to get to know the painting and know in which period of his life he painted it. All this goes with the Rotterdam portrait of Fabritius, the traveller in the La Caze gallery, into a special category in which the portrait of a human being is transformed into something luminous and consoling.

And how very different this is from Michelangelo or Giotto, although the latter however comes close to it, and Giotto thus forms a sort of possible hyphen between the school of Rembrandt and the Italians.

[[sketch A](#)] Yesterday I started working again a little – a thing I see from my window – a field of yellow stubble which is being ploughed, the opposition of the purplish ploughed earth with the strips of yellow stubble, background of hills.

60 Mon cher Theo, depuis que <sup>mon 2 sept</sup> je t'ai écrit le 16  
 j'ai mieux et tout en ne sachant pas si cela  
 durera, je ne veux pas attendre plus longtemps  
 pour t'écrire de nouveau.  
 Merci encore une fois de cette belle eau-forte d'après  
 Rembrandt. Je voudrais bien connaître le  
 tableau et savoir à quelle époque de sa vie il l'a  
 peint. Tout cela rentre avec le portrait  
 de Fabritius de Rotterdam le voyageur de  
 la galerie Lucase dans une catégorie  
 spéciale ou le portrait d'un être  
 humain se transforme en paysage  
 qu'il est lumineux et de consolant.  
 Et comme cela est très différent de  
 Michel Ange ou de Giotto qui que  
 le dernier s'en rapproche pourtant  
 et qu'aussi Giotto forme comme le  
 trait d'union possible entre l'école  
 de Rembrandt et les italiens.



j'ai bien recommencé à travailler un peu - une chose  
 que j'avais de ma fenêtre - un champ de chaume jaune  
 qu'on laboure l'opposition de la terre labourée violacée  
 avec les bandes de chaume jaune fond de  
 collines.

Work distracts me infinitely better than anything else, and if I could once really throw myself into it with all my energy that might possibly be the best remedy.

The impossibility of having models, a heap of other things, prevent me from managing it however. Anyway, I really must try to take things a little passively and be patient.

I often think of our pals in Brittany, who are certainly doing better work than I am. If, with the experience I'm having at present, it was possible for me to begin again, I wouldn't go and look around the south.

Were I independent and free, I would nevertheless have retained my enthusiasm, for there are some really beautiful things to do.

Such as the vineyards, the fields of olive trees. *If* I had confidence in the management here, nothing would be better and simpler than to put all my furniture here at the hospital and quietly continue. If I were to recover, or in the intervals, I could sooner or later come back to Paris or Brittany for a time. But first they're *very expensive* here, and then I'm afraid of the other patients at the moment. Anyway, a heap of reasons mean that I don't think I've been lucky here either.

I'm perhaps exaggerating in the sadness I feel at being knocked down by illness again – but I feel a kind of fear. You'll tell me what I tell myself too, that the fault must be inside me and not in the circumstances or other people. Anyway, it isn't fun.

Mr Peyron has been kind to me and he has long experience, I shan't scorn what he says or considers good.

But will he have a firm opinion, has he written anything definite to you?? And possible?

You can see that I'm still in a very bad mood, it's because things aren't going well. Then I consider myself imbecilic to go and ask doctors for permission to make paintings. Besides, it's to be hoped that if I recover sooner or later, up to a certain point it'll be because I've cured myself by working, which fortifies the will and consequently allows these mental weaknesses less hold.

My dear brother, I wanted to write to you better than this, but things aren't going very well. I have a great desire to go into the mountains to paint for whole days, I hope they'll allow me to in the coming days.

You'll soon see a canvas of a hut in the mountains which I did under the influence of that book by Rod. It would be good for me to stay on a farm for a while, at least I might do some good work there.

I must write to Mother and to Wil in the next few days. Wil asked to be sent a painting, and I'd very much like to give one to Lies as well on the same occasion, who doesn't have any yet as far as I know.

What do you say about Mother going to live in Leiden? I think she's right in this sense, that I can understand that she's pining for her grandchildren. And then there'll be none of us left in Brabant.

Speaking of that – not very long ago in Arles I was reading a book, I can't remember which one, by Henri Conscience. It's excessively sentimental if you like, what with his peasants, but speaking of *Impressionism* do you know that it contains descriptions of landscape with colour notes of accuracy, feeling and primitiveness of the *first* order. And it's always like that. Ah my dear brother, those heaths in the Kempen were something though. But anyway, that won't come back, and onward we go.

He – Conscience – described a brand-new little house with a bright red slate roof in the full sunshine, a garden with dock and onions, potatoes with dark foliage, a beech hedge, a vineyard, and further on the pine trees, the broom all yellow. Don't be afraid, it wasn't like a Cazin, it was like a Claude Monet. Then there's originality even in the excess of sentimentality.

And as for me, who feels it and can't damned well do anything, isn't that sickening.

If you get opportunities for lithographs of Delacroix, Rousseau, Diaz &c., ancient and modern artists, Galeries modernes &c., I can't advise you too strongly to hold onto them, for you'll see that they'll become rare. Yet it was really the way to popularize beautiful things, those 1-franc sheets of those days, those etchings &c. back then. Very interesting the Rodin – Claude Monet brochure. How I'd have liked to see that. Pointless to say that nevertheless I don't agree when he says that Meissonier is nothing and that T. Rousseau isn't much. Meissoniers and Rousseaus are something highly interesting for those who like them and try to discover what the artist was feeling. It isn't possible for everyone to be of that opinion, because one has to have seen and looked at them, and you don't find that on every corner. Now a Meissonier, if you look at it for a year there's still enough in it to look at the next year, never fear. Not to mention that he's a man who had his days of happiness, of perfect finds. Certainly I know, Daumier, Millet, Delacroix

have *another* way of drawing – but Meissonier's execution, that something essentially French above all, although the old Dutchmen would find nothing to fault in it, and yet it's something other than them and it's modern; one has to be blind to believe that Meissonier isn't an artist and – one of the first rank.

Have many things been done that give the note of the 19th century better than the portrait of Hetzel? When Besnard did those two very beautiful panels, primitive man and modern man, which we saw at Petit's, in making the modern man a reader he had the same idea.

And I'll always regret that in our times people believe in the incompatibility of the generation of, say, 48 and the present one. I myself believe that the two hold their own all the same, though I can't prove it.

Let's take good Bodmer for example. Was he not able to study nature as a hunter, a savage, did he not love it and know it with experience of an entire long manly life – and do you think that the first Parisian to come along who goes to the suburbs knows as much or more about it because he'll do a landscape with harsher tones? Not that it's bad to use pure and clashing tones, not that *from the point of view of colour* I'm *always* an admirer of Bodmer, but I admire and I like the man who knew all the forest of Fontainebleau, from the insect to the wild boar and from the stag to the lark. From the tall oak and the lump of rock to the fern and the blade of grass.

Now a thing like that, not anyone who wants to can feel it or find it.

And Brion – oh a maker of Alsatian genre paintings people will tell me. That's fine, he has indeed done the Engagement meal, the Protestant wedding &c. which are indeed Alsatian. When no one is up to illustrating *Les Misérables*, he however does it in a manner unsurpassed up to now, and he isn't mistaken in his types. Is it a small thing to know people so well, the humanity of that period, so well that one scarcely makes a mistake in expression and type?

Ah – the rest of us would have to get old working hard, and that's why we then get despondent when things don't go right.

I think that if you see the Bruyas museum in Montpellier one day, I think that then nothing will move you more than Bruyas himself, when one realizes from his purchases what he sought to be for artists. It's a little disheartening when one sees from certain portraits of him how heartbroken and obviously frustrated his face is. If one doesn't succeed in the south there still remains he who suffered all his life for that cause.



The only serene portraits are the Delacroix and the Ricard.

For example, by a great chance the one by Cabanel is accurate and most interesting as an observation, at least it gives an idea of the man.

I'm pleased that Jo's mother has come to Paris. Next year it will perhaps be a little different and you'll have a child, and that brings a fair few petty vexations of human life – but as certain great miseries of spleen etc. will disappear for ever, that's certainly how it should go.

I'll write to you again soon, I'm not writing to you as I would have wished, I hope that all is well at your place and will continue to go well. Am very, very pleased that Rivet has rid you of the cough, which really worried me a bit too.

What I had in my throat is starting to disappear, I'm still eating with some difficulty, but anyway it has got better.

Good handshake to you and to Jo.

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

## **Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 10 September 1889**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 801)

My dear Theo,

I think your letter is really good, what you say about Rousseau and artists like Bodmer, that they are *men* in any case, and of such a kind that one would wish the world populated with people like that – yes indeed, that's what I myself feel too.

And that J.H. Weissenbruch knows and does the muddy towpaths, the stunted willows, the foreshortenings and the learned and strange perspectives of the canals 'as Daumier does his lawyers', I think that's perfect. Tersteeg did well to buy some of his work from him, the fact that people like that don't sell, according to me that's because there are too many sellers who try to sell other things, with which they deceive the public and mislead them.

Do you know that today, still, when I read by chance the story of some energetic industrialist or above all a publisher, that the same feelings of

indignation then come to me again, the same feelings of anger from the old days when I was with G.&Cie.

Life goes on like that, time doesn't come back, but I'm working furiously, because of the very fact that I know that the opportunities to work don't come back.

Above all, in my case, where a more violent crisis may destroy my ability to paint forever. In the crises I feel cowardly in the face of anguish and suffering – more cowardly than is justified, and it's perhaps this very moral cowardice which, while before I had no desire whatsoever to get better, now makes me eat enough for two, work hard, take care of myself in my relations with the other patients for fear of relapsing – anyway I'm trying to get better now like someone who, having wanted to commit suicide, finding the water too cold, tries to catch hold of the bank again.

My dear brother, you know that I came to the south and threw myself into work for a thousand reasons.

To want to see another light, to believe that looking at nature under a brighter sky can give us a more accurate idea of the Japanese way of feeling and drawing. Wanting, finally, to see this stronger sun, because one feels that without knowing it one couldn't understand the paintings of Delacroix from the point of view of execution, technique, and because one feels that the colours of the prism are veiled in mist in the north.

All of this remains somewhat true. Then when one also adds to it an inclination of the heart towards this south that Daudet did in *Tartarin*, and the fact that here and there I've also found friends and things that I love here.

Will you then understand that while finding my illness horrible I feel that all the same I've entered into attachments that are a little too strong here – attachments which could mean that later on the desire to work here will take hold of me again – while all the same it may well be that I'll return to the north relatively soon.

Yes, for I don't hide from you the fact that in the same way that I'm taking my food avidly at present, I have a terrible desire that comes to me to see my friends again and to see the northern countryside again.

Work is going very well, I'm finding things that I've sought in vain for years, and feeling that I always think of those words of Delacroix that you know, that he found painting when he had neither breath nor teeth left. Ah well, I myself with the mental illness I have, I think of so many other artists

suffering mentally, and I tell myself that this doesn't prevent one from practising the role of painter as if nothing had gone wrong.

When I see that crises here tend to take an absurd religious turn, I would almost dare believe that this even *necessitates* a return to the north. Don't speak too much about this to the doctor when you see him – but I don't know if this comes from living for so many months both at the hospital in Arles and here in these old cloisters. Anyway I ought not to live in surroundings like that, the street would be better then. I am not indifferent, and in the very suffering religious thoughts sometimes console me a great deal. Thus this time during my illness a misfortune happened to me – that lithograph of Delacroix, the Pietà, with other sheets had fallen into some oil and paint and got spoiled.

I was sad about it – then in the meantime I occupied myself painting it, and you'll see it one day, on a no. 5 or 6 canvas I've made a copy of it which I think has feeling – besides, having not long ago seen the Daniel and the Odalisques and the Portrait of Bruyas and the Mulatto woman at Montpellier, I'm still under the impression that it had on me. This is what edifies me, as does reading a fine book like one by Beecher Stowe or Dickens. But what disturbs me is constantly seeing those good women who believe in the Virgin of Lourdes and make up things like that, and telling oneself that one is a prisoner in an administration like that, which very willingly cultivates these unhealthy religious aberrations when it ought to be a matter of curing them. So I say, it would be even better to go, if not into penal servitude then at least into the regiment.

I reproach myself for my cowardice, I ought to have defended my studio better, even if I had to fight with those gendarmes and neighbours. Others in my position would have used a revolver, and indeed, had one killed onlookers like that as an artist one would have been acquitted. I would have done better in that case then, and now I was cowardly and drunk.

Ill too, but I wasn't brave. Then in the face of the Suffering of these crises I feel very fearful too, and so I don't know if my zeal is something other than what I say, it's like the man who wants to commit suicide, and finding the water too cold he struggles to catch hold of the bank again.

But listen – to be in a lodging-house like I saw Braat back then – fortunately that time is far off, no and again *no*.

It would be different if *père* Pissarro or Vignon, for example, wanted to take me into their home. Well I'm a painter myself – that can be sorted out,

and better that the money goes to feed painters than to the excellent nuns.

Yesterday I asked Mr Peyron point blank: since you're going to Paris, what would you say if I suggested that you be good enough to take me with you? He answered in an evasive way – that it was too quick, that he must write to you beforehand.

But he's very kind and very indulgent towards me, and whilst he isn't the absolute master here, far from it, I owe him many freedoms.

Anyway, one must not only make paintings but one must also see people and – from time to time, by associating with others too, recover one's temperament and furnish oneself with ideas. I leave aside the hope that it wouldn't recur – on the contrary I must tell myself that from time to time I'll have a crisis. But then one might for that time go into an asylum or even to the town prison, where there's usually an isolation cell. Don't worry yourself in any case – work is going well and look, I can't tell you how much it gives me a warm glow sometimes to say, I'm going to do this and that again, wheatfields &c.

I've done the portrait of the orderly, and I have a repetition of it for you. It makes quite a curious contrast with the portrait I did of myself, in which the gaze is vague and veiled, while he has something military about him, and dark eyes that are small and lively. I made him a present of it, and I'll also do his wife if she wants to pose. She's a faded woman, an unfortunate, quite resigned one, and really not much, and so insignificant that I myself have a great desire to do that dusty blade of grass. I spoke with her from time to time when I was doing olive trees behind their little farmhouse, and then she told me that she didn't think that I was ill – anyway, you would say that too at present if you saw me working, with my thoughts clear and my fingers so sure that I drew that Delacroix Pietà without taking a single measurement, though there are those four outstretched hands and arms – gestures and bodily postures that aren't exactly easy or simple.

Please send me the canvas soon, if that's possible, and then I think I'll need 10 tubes of zinc white as well.

However, I know quite well that recovery comes, if one is brave, from inside, through the great resignation to suffering and death, through the abandonment of one's own will and one's self-love. But it's not coming to me, I love to paint, to see people and things and everything that makes up our life – artificial – if you like. Yes, real life would be in something else,

but I don't think I belong to that category of souls who are ready to live and also at any moment ready to suffer.

What a funny thing the *touch* is, the brushstroke. Out of doors, exposed to the wind, the sun, people's curiosity, one works as one can, one fills one's canvas regardless. Yet then one catches the true and the essential – that's the most difficult thing. But when one returns to this study again after a time, and orders one's brushstrokes in the direction of the objects – certainly it's more harmonious and agreeable to see, and one adds to it whatever one has of serenity and smiles.

Ah, I'll never be able to render my impressions of certain figures I've seen here. Certainly the road to the south is the road where there's something brand new, but men of the north have difficulty in getting through. And I can see myself already in advance, on the day when I have some success, longing for my solitude and distress here when I see the reaper in the field below through the iron bars of the isolation cell. Every cloud has a silver lining.

To succeed, to have lasting prosperity, one must have a temperament different from mine, I'll never do what I could have and ought to have wanted and pursued.

But as I have dizzy spells so often, I can only live in a situation of the fourth or fifth rank. While I clearly sense the value and originality and superiority of Delacroix, of Millet, for example, then I make a point of telling myself, yes I am something, I can do something. But I must have a basis in these artists, and then produce the little I'm capable of in the same direction.

So *père* Pissarro has been really cruelly struck by those two misfortunes at the same time.

As soon as I read that I had this idea of asking you if there would be a way of going to stay with him.

If you pay him the same thing as here, he'll find it worth his while, for I don't need much – except for working.

So do it directly, and if he doesn't want to I would willingly go to Vignon's.

I'm a little afraid of Pont-Aven, there are so many people there. But what you say about Gauguin interests me a lot. And I still tell myself that G. and I will perhaps work together again. I myself know that G. can do things even better than what he has done, but how to reassure him! I still hope to do



his portrait. Have you seen that portrait he did of me painting sunflowers? My face has lit up after all a lot since, but it was indeed me, extremely tired and charged with electricity as I was then.

And yet to see the country one must live with the common people and in the little houses, the bars &c. And that was what I said to Boch, who complained of seeing nothing that tempted him or made an impression on him. I go walking with him for two days and I show him thirty paintings to do, as different from the north as Morocco would be. I'm curious to know what he's doing at the moment.

And then do you know why the paintings of E. Delacroix – the religious and historical paintings, Christ's barque – the Pietà, the Crusaders, have this allure? Because E. Delacroix, when he does a Gethsemane, went to see on the spot beforehand what an olive grove was like, and the same for the sea whipped up by a hard mistral, and because he must have said to himself, these people whom history talks to us about, doges of Venice, crusaders, apostles, holy women, were of the same type and lived in a manner analogous to those of their present-day descendants.

So I must tell you it, and you can see it in the Berceuse, however failed and weak that attempt may be. Had I had the strength to continue, I'd have done portraits of saints and of holy women from life, and who would have appeared to be from another century and they would be citizens of the present day, and yet would have had something in common with very primitive Christians.

The emotions that that causes are too strong though, I wouldn't survive it – but later, later, I don't say that I won't mount a fresh attack.

What a great man Fromentin was – for those who want to see the orient he will always remain the *guide*. He was first to establish relationships between Rembrandt and the south, between Potter and what he saw himself.

You're right a thousand times over – one mustn't think about all that – one must do – even if it's studies of cabbages and salad to calm oneself down, and after being calmed then – what one is capable of.

When I see them again I'll do repetitions of that study of the Tarascon diligence, the Vineyard, the Harvest and above all the Red bar, that night café which is the most characteristic as regards colour. But the white figure in the middle, correct as regards colour, must be redone, better constructed. But I dare say that this is a bit of the real south, and a calculated combination of the greens with the reds.

My strength has been exhausted too quickly, but I can see from afar the possibility for others to do an infinity of beautiful things. And again and again that idea remains true, that to facilitate the journey of others it would have been good to found a studio somewhere in these parts.

To make the journey from the north to Spain in one go, for example, isn't good, one won't see there what one ought to see – one must first and gradually *accustom one's eyes* to the different light.

I myself have no great need to see works by Titian and Velázquez in museums, I've seen certain living types who have made me know better now what a painting of the south is than before my little journey.

My God, my God, the good people among artists who say that Delacroix is not of the true orient! Look, is the true orient then what Parisians like Gérôme do?

Because you paint a bit of sunny wall, even from life and well and true according to our *northern* way of seeing, does that also prove that you've seen the people of the orient? Now that's what Delacroix was seeking there, which didn't prevent him at all from painting walls in the Jewish wedding and the Odalisques.

Isn't that true – and then Degas says that it's too expensive to drink in the bars while doing paintings, I don't say no, but would he then have me go into the cloisters or the churches, there I'm the one who's afraid.

That's why I make an effort at escape through the present letter, with many handshakes to you and Jo.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I still have to congratulate you on the occasion of Mother's birthday, I wrote to them yesterday but the letter hasn't gone off yet, because I wasn't in the mood to finish it.

It's funny that the idea had already come to me 2 or 3 times before to go to Pissarro's, this time, after you've told me of his recent misfortunes, I don't hesitate to ask it of you.

Yes we must be done here, I can no longer do both things at once, working and doing everything in my power to live with the odd patients here – it's unsettling. I'd like to force myself to go downstairs, but in vain. And yet it's almost 2 months since I've been out in the open air.

In the long run here I would lose the faculty to work, now there I begin to call a halt, and so I'll send them packing, if you agree. And paying for it what's more, no, then one or the other of the artists fallen in misfortune will consent to set up house with me.

Fortunately, you can write that you're well, and Jo too, and that her sister is with you. I'd very much like to be back myself when your child arrives – not with you, certainly *not*, that isn't possible, but in the area around Paris with another painter.

I could, to mention a third, go and stay with the Jouves, who have a lot of children and a whole household.

You'll understand that I've tried to compare the second crisis with the first, and I say only this to you: it appears to me to be some kind of influence from outside rather than a cause that comes from within myself. I may be mistaken, but whatever the case I think you'll consider it right that I'm a little horrified by all religious exaggeration. I can't help thinking of good André Bonger, who himself let out loud shouts when anyone wanted to try out some unguent or other on him. Good Mr Peyron will tell you heaps of things, about probabilities and possibilities of involuntary actions. Good, but if he's specific I'll believe none of it. And we'll see then *what he specifies*, if it's specific. The treatment of the patients in this hospital is certainly easy to follow, even on a journey, for they do absolutely *nothing* about it, they leave them to vegetate in idleness and feed them with stale and slightly spoiled food. And I'll tell you now that from the first day I refused to take this food, and until my crisis I ate nothing but bread and a little soup, which I'll continue to do as long as I remain here. It's true that after this crisis Mr Peyron gave me some wine and meat, which I willingly accept in these first days but wouldn't want to make an exception to the rule for a long time, and it's right to respect the establishment according to their ordinary regime. I must also say that Mr Peyron doesn't give me much hope for the future, which I find justified, he makes me really feel that *everything* is doubtful, that nothing can be ensured in advance. But I myself am *counting* on it recurring, but only work preoccupies me so thoroughly that I think that with the body I have it will continue like this for a long time. The idleness in which these poor unfortunates vegetate is a plague, and there you are, it's a general evil in the towns and country areas under this stronger sun, and having learned differently it's a duty to resist it, certainly for me. I finish this

letter by thanking you again for yours and asking you to write to me again soon, and many handshakes in thought.

## **Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Monday, 21 October 1889**

To Anna van Gogh-Carbentus (letter 811)

Dear Mother,

I wanted to write to you one more time while you're still in the old house, to thank you for your last letter and the news of Cor's safe passage.

I believe that he'll work there with enthusiasm and have some enjoyment in his life now and then. What he writes to you reminds me of what my friend Gauguin told me about Panama and Brazil. I didn't know that Isaäcson is also going to the Transvaal. You know that I never met him personally — but I did write to him recently because he more or less intended to write about my work in a Dutch newspaper, which I asked him not to do, but at the same time to thank him for his loyal sympathy, because from the beginning we often thought about each other's work and have the same ideas about our old Dutch and the present-day French painters.

And I also like De Haan's work a lot.

Now I can inform you that what I promised you is entirely ready — that's to say five of my landscape studies and a small portrait of myself and a study of an interior. I'm afraid it will disappoint you, though, and a few things seem unimportant and ugly to you. Wil and you can do with them as you wish, and give the other sisters a couple of them if you like, that's why I'm sending a couple more.

But this is something that doesn't concern me, only I wanted to make sure that there were things of mine in the family, and am only trying to form a few things into a sort of ensemble that I would prefer to see stay together so that in time it becomes rather more important. Only, I can understand in advance that you won't have room for all 6, and so do with them as you wish. But I advise you to keep them together, at least for a while, since then you'll be better able to judge which you like best in the long run.

I'm sorry that Aunt Mina is suffering so, as you write; it's a good many years since I saw her.

I certainly agree with you that it's a good deal better for Theo like this than before, and just hope everything goes well with Jo's confinement, then they'll be set up for quite a while. It's always good to experience how a human being comes into the world, and that leads many characters to more peace and truth.

The countryside here is very beautiful in the autumn, and the yellow leaves. I'm just sorry there aren't more vineyards here, though I did go and paint one a few hours away. What happens is a large field turns entirely purple and red, like the Virginia creeper at home, and next to it a square of yellow and a little further on a patch that's still green.

All that beneath a sky of magnificent blue, and lilac rocks in the distance. Last year I had a better opportunity to paint that than now.

I would have liked to include something like that with what I'm sending you, but I'll have to owe it to you till another year.

You'll see from the little portrait of myself that I include that although I saw Paris, London and so many other large cities, and that for years at a time, I still look more or less like a peasant from Zundert, Toon or Piet Prins, say, and I sometimes imagine that I feel and think like that too, only the peasants are of more use in the world. It's only when they have all the rest that people get a feeling for, need for paintings, books etc. So in my own estimation I definitely reckon myself below the peasants. Anyway, I plough on my canvases as they do in their fields.

Otherwise things are wretched enough in our profession — that's always been so, in fact — but it's really very bad at present.

And yet there have never been such prices paid for paintings as nowadays.

What keeps us working is friendship for one another and love of nature, and anyway, when one's taken the trouble to become master of the brush, *one can't stop painting*.

Compared with others I'm still among the fortunate ones, but just imagine what it must be like when someone starts in the profession and has to give it up before he's done anything, and there are many like that.

Reckon on 10 years needed to learn the profession, anyone who gets through 6, say, and pays for them and then has to give up, if you knew how miserable that is and how many there are like that. And the high prices one hears about, paid for work by painters who are dead and weren't paid like



that in life, it's a sort of tulip mania from which the living painters get more disadvantage than advantage. And it will also pass like tulip mania.

One can reason, however, that although tulip mania is long gone and forgotten, the flower growers have remained and will remain. And so I regard painting in the same way, that what remains is a sort of flower growing. And as to that I reckon myself fortunate to be in it. But the rest!

These things to prove to you than one mustn't be under any illusions. My letter must go off — at the moment I'm working on a portrait of one of the patients here. It's strange that when one is with them for some time and is used to them, one no longer thinks about their being mad. Embraced in thought by

Your loving  
Vincent

## **Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Tuesday, 26 November 1889**

To Emile Bernard (letter 822)

My dear friend Bernard,

Thank you for your letter, and thank you especially for your photos, which give me an idea of your work.

Incidentally, my brother wrote to me about it the other day, saying that he very much liked the harmoniousness of the colour, a certain nobility in several figures.

Look, in the adoration of the shepherds, the landscape charms me too much for me to dare to criticize, and nevertheless, it's too great an impossibility to imagine a birth like that, on the very road, the mother who starts praying instead of giving suck, the fat ecclesiastical bigwigs, kneeling as if in an epileptic fit, God knows how or why they're there, but I myself don't find it healthy.

Because I adore the true, the possible, were I ever capable of spiritual fervour; so I bow before that study, so powerful that it makes you tremble, by *père* Millet — peasants carrying to the farmhouse a calf born in the fields. Now, my friend — people have felt that from France to America. After that,

would you go back to renewing medieval tapestries for us? Truly, is this a sincere conviction? NO, you can do better than that, and you know that one has to look for the possible, the logical, the true, even if to some extent you had to forget Parisian things à la Baudelaire. How I prefer Daumier to that gentleman!

An annunciation of what — — — I see figures of angels, elegant, my word, a terrace with two cypresses, which I like very much; there's an enormous amount of air, of clarity in it.... but in the end, once this first impression is past, I wonder if it's a mystification, and these secondary characters no longer tell me anything.

But this is enough for you to understand that I would long to see things of yours again, like the painting of yours that Gauguin has, those Breton women walking in a meadow, the arrangement of which is so beautiful, the colour so naively distinguished. Ah, you're exchanging that for something — must one say the word — something artificial — something affected.

Last year, from what Gauguin was telling me, you were doing a painting more or less like this, I imagine. [[sketch A](#)] Against a foreground of grass, a figure of a young girl in a blue or white dress, lying full length. Behind that: edge of a beech wood, the ground covered in fallen red leaves, the verdigrised trunks crossing it vertically — I imagine the hair a colourful note in the tone required as complementary to the white dress: black if the clothing was white, orange if the clothing was blue. But anyway, I said to myself, what a simple subject, and how he knows how to create elegance with nothing.

Gauguin spoke to me of another subject, nothing but three trees, thus effect of orange foliage against blue sky, but still really clearly delineated, well divided, categorically, into planes of contrasting and pure colours — that's the spirit! [[sketch B](#)]



l'année passée vous faisiez un tableau. D'après ce que me disait  
Gauguin à peu près je suppose ainsi:  
Sur un avant plan d'herbe une figure de femme  
fille en robe bleue ou blanche étendue tout de  
son long. Un second plan - lisière de  
bois de hêtres le sol couvert de feuilles rouges,  
londres les troncs vert de gris le barrant verticalement - la chevelure  
je la suppose une note colorée du ton nécessaire comme complémentaire  
de la robe blanche. mais si le vêtement était blanc orangé et le vêtement  
était bleu - mais enfin je ne sais quel motif simple et  
comme il doit faire de l'élégance avec rien -



Gauguin me parla d'un autre motif rien que trois arbres ainsi  
effet de feuillage orangé contre ciel bleu mais encore  
bien nettement délinée bien dessinée catégoriquement  
en plans de couleurs opposées et franches - à la bonne  
heure -

Et lorsque je compare cela à ce cauchemar d'un  
Christ au jardin des oliviers ma foi j'en jure je m'en  
suis hâté et le redemande par la présente  
à hauts cris et l'engueulant ferme de toute la  
force de mes poumons de vouloir bien un peu  
redeviend moi -



Le Christ portant sa croix est atroce. Sont elles harmonieuses  
les tâches de couleurs là dedans? je ne le fais pas grâce <sup>cependant</sup>  
d'un ponceif - tiens ponceif - dans la composition

Lorsque Gauguin était à Paris comme tu le sais une ou deux fois je  
me suis laissé aller à une abstraction dans la berceuse  
une liseuse de romans morte dans une bibliothèque jaune  
et alors l'abstraction me paraissait une voie charmante  
mais c'est terrifiant enchanté ça - mon bon - et  
vite on se trouve devant un mur - Je ne dis pas après  
toute une vie mâle de recherches de lutte avec la nature  
corps à corps on peut s'y risquer mais quant à moi  
je ne veux pas me creuser la tête avec ces choses là  
Et toute l'année au lycée d'après nature me songeant  
guère à l'impressionnisme ni à ceci ni à cela.

Cependant encore une fois je me laisse aller à faire des  
études trop grande et nouvelle et j'en ai assez  
Donc actuellement travaille dans les oliviers cherchant  
les effets variés d'un ciel gris contre terrain jaune avec note  
vert non du feuillage une autre fois le terrain et feuillage  
tout violet contre ciel jaune puis terrain ocre rouge  
et ciel rose-vert - Va ça m'intéresse d'avantage que  
les abstractions ainsi nommées

And when I compare that with that nightmare of a Christ in the Garden of Olives, well, it makes me feel sad, and I herewith ask you again, crying out loud and giving you a piece of my mind with all the power of my lungs, to please become a little more yourself again.

The Christ carrying his Cross is atrocious. Are the splashes of colour in it harmonious? But I won't let you off the hook for a COMMONPLACE — commonplace, you hear — in the composition.

When Gauguin was in Arles, I once or twice allowed myself to be led into abstraction, as you know, in a woman rocking a cradle, a dark woman reading novels in a yellow library, and at that time abstraction seemed an attractive route to me. But that's enchanted ground, — my good fellow — and one soon finds oneself up against a wall. I'm not saying that one may not take the risk after a whole manly life of searching, of fighting hand-to-hand with reality, but as far as I'm concerned I don't want to rack my brains over that sort of thing. And the whole year, have fiddled around from life, hardly thinking of Impressionism or of this or that.

However, once again I'm allowing myself to do stars too big, &c., new setback, and I've enough of that.

So at present am working in the olive trees, seeking the different effects of a grey sky against yellow earth, with dark green note of the foliage; another time the earth and foliage all purplish against yellow sky, then red ochre earth and pink and green sky. See, that interests me more than the so-called abstractions.

And if I haven't written for a long time, it's because, having to struggle against my illness and to calm my head, I hardly felt like having discussions, and found danger in these abstractions. And by working very calmly, beautiful subjects will come of their own accord; it's truly first and foremost a question of immersing oneself in reality again, with no plan made in advance, with no Parisian bias. Besides, am very dissatisfied with this year, but perhaps it will prove a solid foundation for the coming one. I've let myself become thoroughly imbued with the air of the small mountains and the orchards. With that, I'll see. My ambition is truly limited to a few clods of earth, some sprouting wheat. An olive grove. A cypress; the latter not easy to do, for example. You who love the primitives, who study them, I ask you why you appear not to know Giotto. Gauguin and I saw a tiny panel of



his in Montpellier, the death of some sainted woman or other. The expressions in it of pain and ecstasy are human to the point that, 19th century though it may be, you feel you're in it — and believe you were there, present, so much do you share the emotion. If I saw your actual canvases, I believe the colour could nevertheless excite me. But then you speak of portraits that you've done, and have captured precisely; that's something that will be good, and where you will have been yourself.

Here's description of a canvas that I have in front of me at the moment. A view of the garden of the asylum where I am, on the right a grey terrace, a section of house, some rosebushes that have lost their flowers; on the left, the earth of the garden — red ochre — earth burnt by the sun, covered in fallen pine twigs. This edge of the garden is planted with large pines with red ochre trunks and branches, with green foliage saddened by a mixture of black. These tall trees stand out against an evening sky streaked with violet against a yellow background. High up, the yellow turns to pink, turns to green. A wall — red ochre again — blocks the view, and there's nothing above it but a violet and yellow ochre hill. Now, the first tree is an enormous trunk, but struck by lightning and sawn off. A side branch thrusts up very high, however, and falls down again in an avalanche of dark green twigs.

This dark giant — like a proud man brought low — contrasts, when seen as the character of a living being, with the pale smile of the last rose on the bush, which is fading in front of him. Under the trees, empty stone benches, dark box. The sky is reflected yellow in a puddle after the rain. A ray of sun — the last glimmer — exalts the dark ochre to orange — small dark figures prowl here and there between the trunks. You'll understand that this combination of red ochre, of green saddened with grey, of black lines that define the outlines, this gives rise a little to the feeling of anxiety from which some of my companions in misfortune often suffer, and which is called 'seeing red'. And what's more, the motif of the great tree struck by lightning, the sickly green and pink smile of the last flower of autumn, confirms this idea. Another canvas depicts a sun rising over a field of new wheat. Receding lines of the furrows run high up on the canvas, towards a wall and a range of lilac hills. The field is violet and green-yellow. The white sun is surrounded by a large yellow aureole. In it, in contrast to the other canvas, I have tried to express calm, a great peace.

I'm speaking to you of these two canvases, and especially the first, to remind you that in order to give an impression of anxiety, you can try to do it



without heading straight for the historical garden of Gethsemane; in order to offer a consoling and gentle subject it isn't necessary to depict the figures from the Sermon on the Mount — ah — it is — no doubt — wise, right, to be moved by the Bible, but modern reality has such a hold over us that even when trying abstractly to reconstruct ancient times in our thoughts — just at that very moment the petty events of our lives tear us away from these meditations and our own adventures throw us forcibly into personal sensations: joy, boredom, suffering, anger or smiling. The Bible — the Bible — Millet was brought up on it from his childhood, used to read only that book and yet never, or almost never, did biblical paintings. Corot did a Garden of Olives with Christ and the star of Bethlehem: sublime. In his work you feel Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles too, sometimes, as well as the Gospels, but how sober and always giving due weight to modern, possible sensations common to us all. But, you'll say, Delacroix — yes, Delacroix — but then you'd have to *study* in a very different way, yes, *study* history before putting things in their place like that.

So, they're a setback, my dear fellow, your biblical paintings, but... there are few who make mistakes like that, and it's an error, but your return from it will be, I dare to say, astonishing, and it's by making mistakes that one sometimes finds the way. Look, avenge yourself by painting your garden as it is, or anything you like. In any case, it's good to look for what's distinguished, what's noble in figures, and your studies represent an effort that's been made, and so something other than wasted time.

To know how to divide a canvas into large, tangled planes like that, to find contrasting lines and forms — that's technique — trickery, if you like, but anyway, it means you're learning your craft more thoroughly, and that's good. No matter how hateful and cumbersome painting may be in the times in which we live, the person who has chosen this craft, if he nevertheless practises it with zeal, is a man of duty, both sound and loyal. Society sometimes makes existence very hard for us, and from that too comes our impotence and the imperfection of our works. I believe that Gauguin himself suffers greatly from it, too, and cannot develop as he yet has it in him to do.

I myself suffer in that I'm utterly without models. On the other hand, there are beautiful sites here. Have just done 5 no. 30 canvases of the olive trees. And if I still stay here it's because my health is recovering greatly. What I'm making is harsh, dry, but it's because I'm trying to reinvigorate myself by means of rather arduous work, and would fear that abstractions

would make me soft. Have you seen a study of mine with a little reaper? A field of yellow wheat and a yellow sun. It isn't there yet — but in it I've again attacked this devil of a question of yellow. I'm talking about the one that's impastoed and done on the spot, not about the repetition with hatching, in which the effect is weaker. I wanted to do it in pure sulphur. I'd have plenty more things to tell you — but although I write today that my mind is somewhat stronger, previously I was afraid of overheating it before I was cured. In thought a very warm handshake, to Anquetin too, to other friends if you see them, and believe me

Ever yours,  
Vincent

No need to tell you that I regret, for you as well as for your father, that he didn't approve of your spending the season with Gauguin. The latter wrote to me that for reasons of health your service has been postponed for a year. Thank you anyway for the description of the Egyptian house. I would still have liked to know if it was larger or smaller than a cottage back home — the size relative to the human figure, in short. I was looking for information about the colouring in particular.

## **Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1 February 1890**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 850)

My dear Theo,

Today I've just received your good news that you're a father at last, that the most critical moment has passed for Jo, finally that the little one is well. It does me, too, more good and gives me more pleasure than I could express in words. Bravo – and how pleased Mother is going to be. I also received a quite long and very serene letter from her the day before yesterday. Finally what I've certainly hoped for so much for a long time has happened. No need to tell you that I've often thought of the two of you the past few days, and it touched me greatly that Jo still had the kindness to write to me the night before. How brave and calm she is in her danger, that touched me

greatly. Well this contributes a great deal to making me forget these last few days when I was ill, then I no longer know where I am and my mind wanders.

I was extremely surprised by the article on my paintings that you sent me, no need to tell you that I hope to go on thinking that I don't paint like that, but rather I do see from it how I ought to paint. For the article is quite right in the sense that it indicates the gap to be filled, and I think that basically the writer writes it rather to guide not only me but also the other Impressionists, and even rather to make the breach in the right place. So he proposes a collective self, as ideal for the others as it is to me. He tells me simply that there's something good here and there, if you like, in my very imperfect work as well, and there's the consolatory side which I appreciate and which I hope I'm grateful for. Only it must be understood that I don't have a strong enough back to carry out a job like that, and by concentrating the article on me, no need to tell you how I feel mired in flattery, and in my opinion it's as exaggerated as what a certain article by Isaäcson said on your account about you, that at present artists declined to argue, and that a serious movement was silently being created in the little shop on boulevard Montmartre. I admit that it's difficult to say, to express oneself otherwise – just as one can't paint as one sees – and it's therefore not to criticize Isaäcson's boldness or that of the other critic, but as regards us, well, we're *posing* a little for THE *model*, and my word, that's a duty and a job like any other. So if you or I were to gain some reputation or other, it's a matter of trying to retain a certain calm, and if possible presence of mind. Why not say, WITH MORE REASON, what he says about my sunflowers about Quost's magnificent and so-complete Hollyhocks and about his yellow irises, about Jeannin's splendid peonies? And you, like me, foresee that being praised *must* have its other side, its reverse of the coin. But gladly I'm very grateful for the article, or rather 'glad at heart', as the revue song has it, since one can need it as one can truly need a medal. Then an article like that has its own merit as a critical work of art, as such I consider it worthy of respect, and the writer *must* use exalted tones, synthesize his conclusions &c.

But right from the start we must think of not putting your young family *too much* into the artistic environment. Old Goupil ran his household well in the Paris undergrowth, and I think that you'll still think of him very often. Things have changed so much, for today his cold aloofness would be

shocking, but his strength to weather so many storms, that though was something.

Gauguin proposed, very vaguely it's true, founding a studio in his name, he, De Haan and I, but said that first he's pursuing his Tonkin project vigorously, and he appears to have cooled about continuing to paint, I don't know exactly why. And he's the sort of man who would scarper to Tonkin, indeed, he has a certain need for expansion and finds the artist's life – and to an extent he's right – a mean one. With his experiences of several journeys, what can one say to him? So I hope that he'll feel that you and I are indeed his friends without counting on us too much, which he doesn't anyway. He writes with a lot of reserve, more serious than the other year. I've just written a line to Russell once again to remind him about Gauguin a little, for I know that Russell is very serious and strong as a man. And if I got back together with G., then we'd have need of Russell. Gauguin and Russell are people with a rustic background; wild no, but with a certain innate gentleness of the far-off fields, probably much more than you or I, that's how I find them.

One must – it is true – believe in it a little from time to time in order to see it. If, for myself, I wanted to continue, let's call it TRANSLATING certain pages of Millet, then in order to prevent people, not criticizing me, I couldn't care about that, but bothering or obstructing me under the pretext that I'm manufacturing copies – then among the artists I need people like Russell or Gauguin to carry this task to a successful conclusion, to make something serious of it. To do the things by Millet that you sent, for example, the choice of which I consider completely right – I have scruples of conscience, and I took the pile of photographs and I sent them unhesitatingly to Russell so that I shouldn't see them again until I'd thought long and hard about it. I don't want to do it before first having heard something of your opinion, then also that of certain others on those that you'll soon receive. Without that I'd have scruples of conscience, a fear that it might be plagiarism. And not now, but in a few months, I'll try to get Russell's honest opinion about the usefulness of the thing. In any case, Russell *has outbursts*, he gets angry, he says something true, and that's what I need sometimes. You know that I found the Virgin so dazzling *that I didn't dare look*. Immediately I felt a – 'not yet'. Now the illness makes me very sensitive, and for the moment I don't feel capable of continuing these 'translations' when it would involve such masterpieces. I'm stopping with the sower, which is in progress and isn't coming along as would be desirable. However, being ill, I thought a lot

about continuing this work, and that *when* I do it I do it calmly, you'll see it soon when I send the five or 6 finished canvases. I hope that Mr Lauzet will come, I very much want to make his acquaintance. I trust in his opinion when he says that it's Provence, there he touches on the difficulty, and like the other fellow he points out a thing to be done rather than one done. The landscapes with the cypresses! Ah, that wouldn't be easy. Aurier feels it too when he says that even black is a colour, and about their flame-like aspect. I'm thinking of it but I don't dare do it either, and say like Isaäcson, who is cautious, that I don't yet feel that we've reached that point. It requires a certain dose of inspiration, a ray from on high which doesn't belong to us, to do beautiful things. When I'd done those sunflowers I was seeking the contrary and yet the equivalent, and I said, it's the cypress. I'm stopping there – I'm a little anxious about a woman friend who is still ill, it seems, and to whom I'd like to go, she's the one whose portrait I did in yellow and black, and she had changed so much. It's nervous crises and the complications of a premature change of life, very difficult in short. She looked like an old grandfather last time. I had promised to come back in a fortnight and was taken ill again myself.

Anyway, for me the good news you've told me and that article and a heap of things mean that I'm personally feeling completely well today.

Now in thought I remain with you all as I finish my letter. May Jo long remain for us all that she is. Now as for the little one, why then don't you call him Theo in memory of our father, that would certainly give me so much pleasure. Handshake.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

I'm sorry too that Mr Salles didn't find you. Thanks again to Wil for her kind letter, I'd have liked to reply to it today but I'll put it back until a few days from now, tell her that Mother has written me another long letter from Amsterdam. How happy she's going to be too.

If you see him, for the time being thank Mr Aurier very much for his article, naturally I'll send you a line for him, and a study.



## Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Sunday, 9 or Monday, 10 February 1890

To Albert Aurier (letter 853)

Dear Mr Aurier,

Thank you very much for your article in the *Mercure de France*, which greatly surprised me. I like it very much as a work of art in itself, I feel that you create colours with your words; anyway I rediscover my canvases in your article, but better than they really are — richer, more significant. However, I feel ill at ease when I reflect that what you say should be applied to others rather than to me. For example, to Monticelli above all. Speaking of ‘he is — as far as I know — the only painter who perceives the coloration of things with such intensity, with such a metallic, gem-like quality’ — if you will please go and see a particular bouquet by Monticelli at my brother’s place — bouquet in white, forget-me-not blue and orange — then you will feel what I mean. But for a long time the best, the most astonishing Monticellis, have been in Scotland, in England. In a museum in the north however — the one in Lille I think, there must still be a marvel by him, far richer and certainly no less French than Watteau’s *Departure for Cythera*. At present Mr Lauzet is in the process of reproducing around thirty Monticellis. Here you have it, as far as I know there is no colourist who comes so straight and directly from Delacroix; and yet it is likely, in my opinion, that Monticelli only had Delacroix’s colour theories at second hand; in particular he had them from Diaz and Ziem. It seems to me that his, Monticelli’s, artistic temperament is exactly that of the author of the *Decameron* — Boccaccio — a melancholy man, an unhappy, rather resigned man, seeing high society’s party pass by, the lovers of his day, painting them, analyzing them, he — the outcast. Oh! He does not *imitate* Boccaccio any more than Henri Leys imitated the primitives. Well, this was to say that things seem to have strayed onto my name that you would do better to say of Monticelli, to whom I owe a great deal. Next I owe a great deal to Paul Gauguin, with whom I worked for a few months in Arles, and whom, besides, I already knew in Paris.

Gauguin, that curious artist, that stranger whose bearing and gaze vaguely recall Rembrandt’s *Portrait of a man* in the La Caze gallery, that friend who likes to make one feel that a good painting should be the equivalent of a good deed, not that he says so, but anyway it is difficult to

spend time with him without thinking of a certain moral responsibility. A few days before we parted, when illness forced me to enter an asylum, I tried to paint 'his empty place'.

It is a study of his armchair of dark, red-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the absent person's place a lighted candlestick and some modern novels. If you have the opportunity, as a memento of him, please go and look a little at this study again, which is entirely in broken tones of green and red. You may perhaps then realize that your article would have been more accurate and – it would seem to me – thus more powerful – if in dealing with the question of the future 'painting of the tropics' and the question of colour, you had done justice to Gauguin and Monticelli before talking about me. For the share that falls or will fall to me will remain, I assure you, very secondary.

And then, I would also have something else to ask of you. Supposing that the two canvases of sunflowers that are presently at the Vingtistes have certain qualities of colour, and then also that they express an idea symbolizing 'gratitude'. Is this any different from so many paintings of flowers that are more skilfully painted and which people do not yet sufficiently appreciate, *père* Quost's Hollyhocks, Yellow Irises? The magnificent bouquets of peonies which Jeannin produces in abundance? You see, it seems to me so difficult to separate Impressionism from other things, I cannot see the point of so much sectarian thinking as we have seen these last few years, but I fear its absurdity.

And, in closing, I declare that I do not understand that *you* spoke of Meissonier's infamies. It is perhaps from that excellent fellow Mauve that I have inherited a boundless admiration for Meissonier; Mauve was endless in his praise for Troyon and Meissonier – a strange combination.

This is to draw your attention to how much people abroad admire, without attaching the slightest importance to what unfortunately so often divides artists in France. What Mauve often repeated was something like this, 'if you want to do colour you must also know how to draw a fireside or an interior like Meissonier'.

I shall add a study of cypresses for you to the next consignment I send to my brother, if you will do me the pleasure of accepting it as a memento of your article. I am still working on it at the moment, wanting to put in a small figure. The cypress is so characteristic of the landscape of Provence, and you sensed it when saying: 'even the colour black'. Until now I have not been

able to do them as I feel it; in my case the emotions that take hold of me in the face of nature go as far as fainting, and then the result is a fortnight during which I am incapable of working. However, before leaving here, I am planning to return to the fray to attack the cypresses. The study I have intended for you depicts a group of them in the corner of a wheatfield on a summer's day when the mistral is blowing. It is therefore the note of a certain blackness enveloped in blue moving in great circulating currents of air, and the vermilion of the poppies contrasts with the black note.

You will see that this constitutes more or less the combination of tones of those pretty Scottish checked cloths: green, blue, red, yellow, black, which once appeared so charming to you as they did to me, and which alas one scarcely sees any more these days.

In the meantime, dear sir, please accept my grateful thanks for your article. If I were to come to Paris in the spring I shall certainly not fail to come and thank you in person.

Vincent van Gogh

When the study I send you is dry right through, also in the impasto, which will not be the case for a year – I should think you would do well to give it a good coat of varnish. And between times it should be washed several times with plenty of water to get out the oil completely. This study is painted in full Prussian blue, that colour about which people say so many bad things and which nevertheless Delacroix used so much. I think that once the Prussian blue tones are really dry, by varnishing you will obtain the dark, the very dark tones needed to bring out the different dark greens.

I do not quite know how this study should be framed, but as I really want it to make one think of those dear Scottish fabrics, I have noticed that a very simple flat frame, *bright orange lead*, creates the desired effect with the blues of the background and the dark greens of the trees. Without this there would perhaps not be enough red in the canvas, and the upper part would appear a little cold.

**Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 29 April 1890**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 863)

My dear Theo,

I haven't been able to write to you until now, but as I'm feeling a little better these days I didn't want to delay wishing a happy year to you, your wife and your child, since it's your birthday. At the same time, please accept the various paintings I'm sending you with my thanks for all the kindnesses you've shown me, for without you I would be most unhappy.

You'll see that first there are canvases after Millet. As these aren't destined for public viewing, perhaps you'll make a present of them to our sisters sooner or later. But first you must keep the ones you consider good, and as many as you wish, they're absolutely yours. One of these days you must send me some other things by ancient and modern artists to do, if you find any.

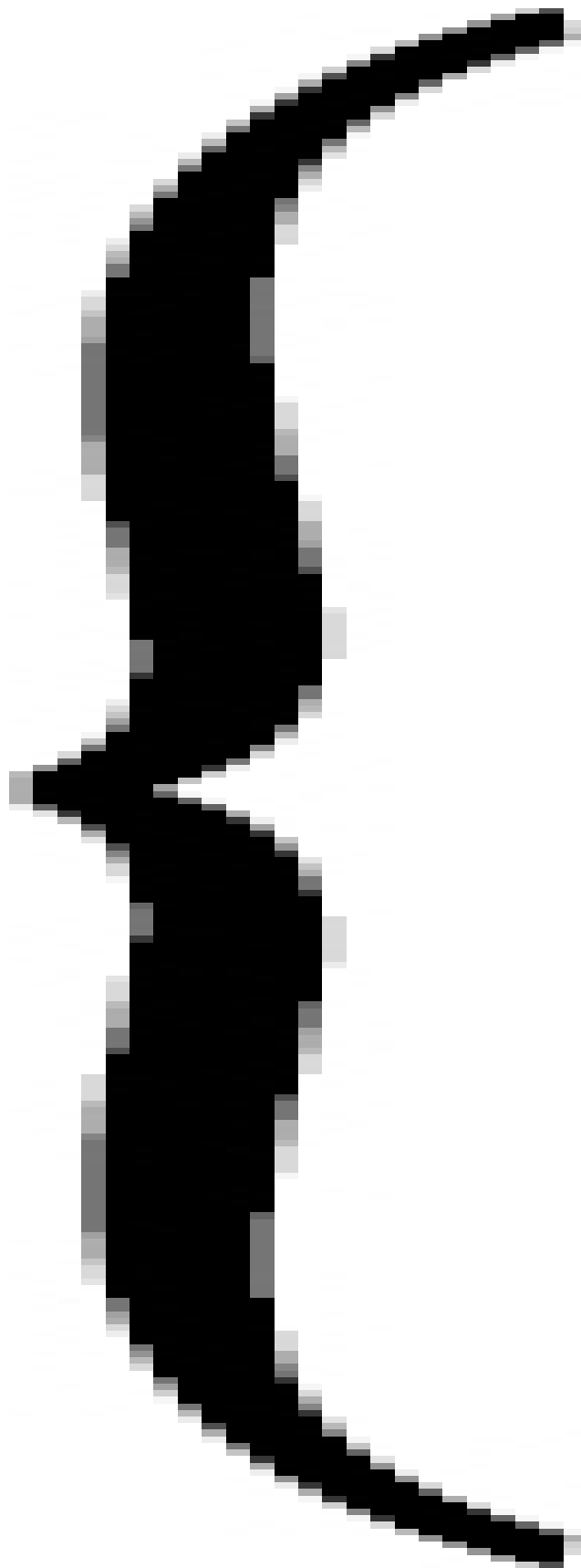
The rest of the canvases are meagre, I'm very much behind, not having been able to work for two months. You'll find that the olive trees with the pink sky are the best, with the mountains, I would imagine; the first go well as a pendant to those with the yellow sky. As regards the portrait of the Arlésienne, you know that I've promised our friend Gauguin one, and you must see that he gets it. Then the cypresses are for Mr Aurier. I would have liked to redo them with a little less impasto, but I don't have the time.

Anyway, they must be washed again several times in cold water, then a strong varnish when the impasto is dry right through, then the blacks won't get dirty when the oil has fully evaporated. Now I would necessarily need colours, part of which you could well get from Tanguy's if he's hard up, or if that would please him. But of course he mustn't be dearer than the other.

Here's the list of colours I would need

Large  
tubes

12 zinc white, 3 cobalt, 5 Veronese  
green  
1 ordinary lake  
2 emerald green, 4 chrome 1, 2  
chrome 2  
1 orange lead, 2 ultramarine





Then (but from Tasset's) 2 geranium lake, medium-sized tubes.

You would do me a service by sending me at least half of it at once, at once, for I've lost too much time.

Then I would need 6 brushes [[sketch A](#)]

6 fitch brushes [[sketch B](#)]

mon Voici la liste des couleurs qu'il me faudrait  
12 blanc de zine 3 Cobalt 5 Vert teronère  
1 Laque ordinaire ~~ou laque geranium~~ ~~ou plutôt 2~~  
2 Vert émeraude 4 Chrome 1 2 Chrome 2  
1 mine orange 2 Outremer

Puis (mais chez Tasset) ~~en tant que~~ 2 laque geranium  
tubes moyen format

Tu me rendrais service en m'en faisant parvenir  
au moins la moitié de suite de suite car j'ai perdu  
trop de temps.

Puis il me faudrait 6 broches ~~à~~  
6 putois ~~à~~

à peu près de ces grandeurs. et 7 mètres toile ou même 10  
Que le due de ces deux mois passés cela va pas bien  
du tout je suis triste et embêté plus que je ne saurais  
l'exprimer et je ne sais plus où j'en suis

~~Not~~ La commande de couleurs étant un peu lourde  
lorsque moi attendre la moitié si cela te convient mieux  
Etant malade j'ai bien encore fait quelques petites  
loides de tête que tu verras plus tard des souvenirs  
du nord et à présent je viens de terminer un  
coin de prairie ensoleillée que je crois plus ou moins  
vigoureux Tu verras cela bientôt.

Monsieur Peyron étant absent je n'ai pas encore lu  
tes lettres mais j'ai vu qu'il en est venu. Il a été assez  
bon pour te mettre au courant de la situation mais  
je ne sais que faire et que penser. mais j'ai grande  
envie de sortir de cette maison. Cela ne t'étonnera  
pas je n'ai pas besoin de l'en dire davantage.

around these sizes, and 7 metres of canvas, or even 10.

What can I tell you of these two last months, things aren't going well at all, I'm more sad and bored than I could tell you, and I no longer know what point I'm at.

As the order for colours is a little large, let me wait for half if that suits you better.

While I was ill I nevertheless still did a few small canvases from memory which you'll see later, reminiscences of the north, and now I've just finished a sunlit corner of a meadow which I think is fairly vigorous. You'll see it soon.

As Mr Peyron is away I haven't yet read your letters, but I know that some have come. He has been quite kind in informing you of the situation, as for me I don't know what to do or think. But I have a great desire to leave this place. That won't surprise you, I don't need to tell you any more about it.

Letters have also come from home, which I haven't yet had the courage to read, so melancholy do I feel.

Please ask Mr Aurier not to write any more articles about my painting, tell him earnestly that first he is wrong about me, then that really I feel too damaged by grief to be able to face up to publicity. Making paintings distracts me – but if I hear talk of them that pains me more than he knows. How is Bernard? Since there are duplicates of some canvases, if you want you could do an exchange with him, because a good-quality canvas of his would look well in your collection. I fell ill at the time I was doing the almond-tree blossoms. If I'd been able to continue working, you can judge from that that I would have done others of the trees in blossom. Now the trees in blossom are almost finished, really I have no luck. Yes, I must try to leave here, but where am I to go? I don't believe one can be more shut up and imprisoned in the places where they don't pretend to leave you free, such as at Charenton or Montevergues.

If you write home, give them my warm regards and tell them I think of them often.

Then good handshake to you and Jo. Believe me

Ever yours,  
Vincent.

Please send me what you can find of *figures* among my old drawings, I'm thinking of redoing the painting of the peasants eating supper, lamplight effect. That canvas must be completely dark now, perhaps I could redo it entirely from memory. You must above all send me the women gleaning and diggers, if there are any left.

Then if you like I'll redo the old tower at Nuenen and the cottage. I think that if you still have them I could now make something better of them from memory.

# Deceptive Peace and Quiet

## Auvers-sur-Oise, May 1890–July 1890

Van Gogh began to entertain hopes of leaving the asylum in Saint-Rémy and spending some time in the north of France. There were two options: finding another clinic where he would be allowed to work, or going to live near someone who would keep an eye on him. Theo found a doctor willing to do this in Auvers-sur-Oise, a rural village about thirty kilometres north of Paris, on the banks of the river Oise. Even though Van Gogh suffered another attack in April, he recovered with remarkable speed and did not want to wait longer than necessary to arrange his departure from Saint-Rémy.

Van Gogh viewed his stay in the south as a fiasco, but he left in the conviction that he had, in the end, managed to create a series of works that, taken altogether, truly reflected the character of Provence: the colour, nature, the landscape, the people. Greatly relieved, he took the train to Paris on 16 May 1890.

Vincent stayed briefly in Paris with Theo, Jo and their baby Vincent Willem, and met several acquaintances, but it soon became too much for him. On 20 May he took the train for Auvers. He lodged at the café on the place de la Mairie, run by Arthur Ravoux and his wife Adeline. He soon struck up a friendship with Paul Gachet, the doctor whom Pissarro had recommended. Gachet was also an amateur artist, and took Vincent under his wing. Over the next two months Van Gogh painted and drew with the utmost intensity, producing remarkable landscapes and portraits.

In Auvers, all had seemed well. Van Gogh was working hard, some articles had appeared in the press about his paintings, and many people had now seen his work. Gauguin had written to him, saying ‘you have never worked with so much *balance* while conserving the sensation and the interior warmth needed for a *work of art*’ (884), and Theo had been equally encouraging: ‘you have found your path, old brother, your carriage is already sturdy and strong.’ (894)





Café on place de la Mairie (now Auberge Ravoux), Auvers-sur-Oise





Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Theo's wife, with their son Vincent Willem, April 1890

There seemed to be good reasons to be every bit as positive about Vincent's health. Dr Gachet had told Theo in early June that he thought Vincent cured, and Vincent himself wrote to Theo and Jo that in Auvers 'the nightmare' has ceased 'to such an extent' (881). In the middle of July, Vincent wrote to his mother and sister Wil that 'the turmoil in my head has really abated so much.' (899)

However, quite a few uncertainties and tensions remained. Theo wrote to Vincent, telling him that he was worried about his position at Boussod, Valadon & Cie, and about his baby son's poor health. He considered resigning from the firm and starting up as an independent art dealer, but failed to gain the necessary backing from the Van Gogh uncles in Holland. In June, Theo took Jo and the baby to visit Vincent, and he, in turn, came to see them in Paris. On 6 July, a conversation took place in Theo and Jo's apartment at which Andries Bonger and Vincent were also present. Bonger – Jo's brother, and a friend of Theo – declared himself unwilling to enter into a business partnership, dashing Theo's hopes of setting up as an independent dealer. Theo's professional problems, the baby's illness and tensions between Jo's brother and sister-in-law complicated the visit. Jo later felt that she had been unfairly impatient with Vincent, who had become anxious to leave.

On Sunday, 27 July 1890, Van Gogh went to paint in the fields outside Auvers. At some point he decided to put an end to his life. The immediate cause and precise circumstances are unknown, but it is clear that he had little faith in the future, despite his passion for work. He shot himself in the chest with a pistol (it is not known how he got hold of it) and lost consciousness. When he came round, he managed somehow to return to Ravoux's café. Help was summoned, but nothing could be done to prevent his death in the early morning of 29 July.

## **Auvers-sur-Oise, Tuesday, 3 June 1890**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 877)

My dear Theo,

For several days now I'd have liked to write to you with a rested mind, but have been absorbed in work. This morning your letter arrives, for which I thank you and for the 50-franc note it contained. Yes, I think that it would be good for many reasons that we were all together again here for a week of your holidays, if longer isn't possible. I often think of you, Jo and the little one, and I see that the children here look well in the healthy fresh air. And yet it's difficult enough to raise them, even here, all the more is it rather terrible sometimes to keep them safe and sound in Paris on a fourth floor. But anyway, one must take things as they are. Mr Gachet says that father and mother must feed themselves quite naturally, he talks of taking 2 litres of beer a day &c., in those amounts. But you'll certainly enjoy furthering your acquaintance with him, and he's already counting on it, speaks of it every time I see him, that you'll all come. He certainly appears to me as ill and confused as you or I, and he's older and a few years ago he lost his wife, but he's very much a doctor, and his profession and his faith keep him going however. We're already firm friends, and by chance he also knew Bruyas of Montpellier and has the same ideas on him as I have, that he's someone important in the history of modern art. I'm working on his portrait [[sketch A](#)] the head with a white cap, very fair, very light, the hands also in light carnation, a blue frock coat and a cobalt blue background, leaning on a red table on which are a yellow book and a foxglove plant with purple flowers. It's in the same sentiment as the portrait of myself that I took when I left for here.



Mon cher Theo, déjà depuis plusieurs jours j'aurais désiré t'écrire à tête reposée mais ai été absorbé par le travail. Ce matin arrive ta lettre de laquelle je te remercie et du billet de 50 fr. qu'elle contenait. Oui je crois que pour bien des choses il serait bien que nous fussions encore ensemble tous ici pour une huitaine de tes vacances si plus longtemps n'est pas possible. Je pense souvent à toi à 70 et au petit, et je vois que les enfants ici au grand air sain ont l'air de bien se porter. Et pourtant c'est déjà ici aussi difficile assez de les élever à plus forte raison est ce plus ou moins terrible à de certains moments de les garder sains & sants à Paris dans un quatrième étage. Mais enfin il faut prendre les choses comme elles sont. M. Gachet dit qu'il faut que père et mère se nourrissent bien naturellement il parle de prendre 2 litres de bière par jour &c. Dans ces mesures là. Mais tu feras certes avec plaisir plus ample connaissance avec lui et il y compte déjà en parle toutes les fois que je le vois que vous tous vendrez. Il me paraît certes aussi malade et ahuri que toi au envoi et il est plus âgé et il a perdu il y a quelques années sa femme mais il est très médecin et son métier et sa foi le laissent pourtant. Nous sommes déjà très amis et par hasard il a connu encore Breas de Montpellier et a les mêmes idées sur lui que j'ai que c'est quelqu'un d'important dans l'histoire de l'art moderne. Je travaille à son portrait



taille avec une casquette blanche très blonde très claire les mains aussi à carnation claire un trac bleu et un fond bleu cobalt appuyé sur une table rouge sur laquelle un livre jaune et une plante de digitale à fleurs pourpres. Cela fait ~~un portrait~~ est dans le même sentiment que le portrait de moi que j'ai pris lorsque je suis parti pour ici. ~~Il est très bon~~ M. Gachet est absolument fanatique pour ce portrait et veut que j'en fasse un de lui & je peux absolument comme cela ce que je désire faire aussi. Il est maintenant aussi arrivé à comprendre le dernier portrait d'Arlesienne et dont tu en as un en rose. Il revient lorsqu'il veut voir les études tout le temps sur ces deux portraits et il les admet en plein mais en plein tels qu'ils sont.



Mr Gachet is absolutely *fanatical* about this portrait, and wants me to do one of him if I can, absolutely like that, which I also wish to do. He has now also come to understand the last portrait of the Arlésienne, one of which you have in pink – he comes back all the time, when he comes to see the studies, to these two portraits and he accepts them fully, but fully as they are. I hope to send you a portrait of him soon. Then I painted two studies at his house which I gave him last week. One aloes with marigolds and cypresses, then last Sunday white roses, vines and a white figure in it.

I'll very probably also do the portrait of his daughter, who is 19, and with whom I can easily imagine Jo will quickly make friends.

So I'm looking forward to doing the portraits of all of you in the open air, yours, Jo's and the little one's.

I still haven't found anything interesting in the way of a possible studio, and yet I'll have to take a room to put in the canvases which are surplus at your apartment and which are at Tanguy's. For they still need a great deal of retouching. But anyway, I live from day to day – the weather is so fine. And my health is good, I go to bed at 9 o'clock but I get up at 5 o'clock most of the time.

I have hopes that it won't be disagreeable to be together again after a long absence. And I also hope that I'll continue to feel much surer of my brush than before I went to Arles. And Mr Gachet says that he would consider it highly improbable that it should recur, and that it's going completely well. But he, too, complains bitterly of the state of things everywhere in the villages where the least foreigner has come, that life there becomes so horribly expensive. He says that he's astonished that the people where I am lodge and feed me for that, and that I'm still fortunate, compared to others who have come and whom he's known. That if you come, and Jo and the little one, you can't do better than stay at this same inn. Now nothing, absolutely nothing keeps us here but Gachet – but the latter will remain a friend, I'd assume. I feel that at his place I can do not too bad a painting every time I go there, and he'll certainly continue to invite me to dinner each Sunday or Monday.

But up to now, however agreeable it is to do a painting there, it's a chore for me to dine and lunch there for, the excellent man goes to the trouble of making dinners in which there are 4 or 5 courses, which is as abominable for him as it is for me, for he certainly doesn't have a strong

stomach. What has held me back a little from saying something about it is that I see that, for him, it reminds him of the days of yore when people had family dinners, which anyway we too well know.

But the modern idea of eating one, at most two courses is, however, certainly progress, and a healthy return to true antiquity.

Anyway *père* Gachet is a lot, yes a lot like you and I. I was pleased to read in your letter that Mr Peyron asked for news of me when he wrote to you. I'm going to write to him this very evening that things are going well, for he was very kind to me and I'll certainly not forget him. Dumoulin, the one who has Japanese paintings at the Champ de Mars, has come back here, and I very much hope to meet him.

What did Gauguin say about the last portrait of the Arlésienne that's done after his drawing? You'll end up seeing, I would think, that it's one of the least bad things I've done. Gachet has a Guillaumin, naked woman on a bed, which I consider very beautiful, he also has a very old Guillaumin portrait by him, very different from ours, dark but interesting.

But his house, you will see, is full, full like an antique dealer's, of things that aren't always interesting, it's terrible, even. But in all of this there's this good aspect, that there would always be what I need there for arranging flowers or still lifes. I've done studies for him, to show him that should he not be paid in money we'll nevertheless still compensate him for what he does for us.

Do you know an etching by Bracquemond, the portrait of Comte, it's a masterpiece.

I'd also need as soon as possible 12 tubes zinc white from Tasset and 2 medium tubes geranium lake.

Then as soon as you could send them I'd be absolutely set upon copying all of Bague's Etudes au fusain again, you know the nude figures. I can draw them quite quickly, let's say the 60 sheets that there are in a month, so you might send a copy on loan, I'd make sure not to stain or dirty it. If I neglected to keep on studying proportions and the nude I'd find myself in a bad position later on. Don't think this absurd or futile.

Gachet also told me that if I wanted to give him great pleasure he would like me to redo for him the copy of Delacroix's Pietà, which he gazed at for a long time. Later he'll probably give me a hand with the models, I feel that he'll understand us completely, and that he'll work with you and me without reservation, with all his intelligence, for the love of art for art's sake. And

he'll perhaps have me do some portraits. Now to have clients for portraits one must be able to show different ones that one has done. That's the only possibility I can see of placing something. But however, however, certain canvases will one day find collectors. Only I think that all the fuss created by the large prices paid lately for Millets &c. has further worsened the state of things as regards the chance one has of merely recouping one's painting expenses. It's enough to make one dizzy. So why are we thinking about it, it would stupefy us. Better still, perhaps, to seek a little friendship and live from day to day. I hope that the little one will continue to be well, and you two also until we see each other again, more soon, I shake your hand firmly.

Vincent

## **Auvers-sur-Oise, Thursday, 5 June 1890**

To Willemien van Gogh (letter 879)

My dear sister,

I ought to have replied to your two letters long since, which I received while still in St-Rémy, but the journey, work and a host of new emotions up to today made me put it off from one day to the next. It interested me very much that you've cared for patients at the Walloon hospital, that's certainly how one learns heaps of things, the best and most necessary that one can learn, and I myself regret that I know nothing, in any event not enough, about all that.

It was a great happiness for me to see Theo again, to meet Jo and the little one. Theo was coughing more than when I left him more than 2 years ago, but while talking and when I saw him at close hand, however, I considered him certainly rather changed for the better, all things considered, and Jo is full of both good sense and good will. The little one is not sickly, but not strong either. It's a good system that if one lives in a large town the woman gives birth in the country and spends the first months there with the little one. But there you are, for the first time especially, as the birth is frightening, they certainly couldn't have done better or otherwise than they did. I hope that they'll come here to Auvers for a few days soon.

For me the journey and the rest up to now have gone well, and coming back to the north distracts me a lot. Then I've found in Dr Gachet a ready-made friend and something like a new brother would be – so much do we resemble each other physically, and morally too. He's very nervous and very bizarre himself, and has rendered much friendship and many services to the artists of the new school, as much as was in his power. I did his portrait the other day and am also going to paint that of his daughter, who is 19. He lost his wife a few years ago, which has greatly contributed to breaking him. We were friends, so to speak, immediately, and I'll go and spend one or two days a week at his house working in his garden, of which I've already painted two studies, one with plants from the south, aloes, cypresses, marigolds, the other with white roses, vines and a figure. Then a bouquet of buttercups. With that I have a larger painting of the village church – an effect in which the building appears purplish against a sky of a deep and simple blue of pure cobalt, the stained-glass windows look like ultramarine blue patches, the roof is violet and in part orange. In the foreground a little flowery greenery and some sunny pink sand. It's again almost the same thing as the studies I did in Nuenen of the old tower and the cemetery. Only now the colour is probably more expressive, more sumptuous. But in the last few days at St-Rémy I worked like a man in a frenzy, especially on bouquets of flowers. Roses and violet Irises.

For Theo and Jo's little one I brought back a rather large painting — which they've hung above the piano – white almond blossoms – big branches on a sky-blue background, and in their apartment they also have a new portrait of an Arlésienne. My friend Dr Gachet is *decidedly enthusiastic* about this latest portrait of the Arlésienne, one of which I also have myself, and about a portrait of myself, and that gave me pleasure, since he'll drive me to do figure work and I hope he'll find me a few interesting models to do. What I'm most passionate about, much much more than all the rest in my profession – is the portrait, the modern portrait. I seek it by way of colour, and am certainly not alone in seeking it in this way. I would like, you see I'm far from saying that I can do all this, but anyway I'm aiming at it, I *would like* to do portraits which would look like apparitions to people a century later. So I don't try to do us by photographic resemblance but by our passionate expressions, using as a means of expression and intensification of the character our science and modern taste for colour. Thus the portrait of Dr Gachet shows you a face the colour of an overheated and sun-scorched

brick, with a reddish head of hair, a white cap, in surroundings of landscape, blue background of hills, his suit is ultramarine blue, this brings out the face and makes it paler, despite the fact that it's brick-coloured. The hands, hands of an obstetrician, are paler than the face.

Before him on a red garden table yellow novels and a dark purple foxglove flower. My portrait of myself is almost like this too, but the blue is a fine southern blue and the suit is light lilac. The portrait of the Arlésienne is of a colourless and matt flesh tone, the eyes calm and very simple, the clothing black, the background pink, and she's leaning her elbow on a green table with green books. But in the one Theo has, the clothing is pink, the background yellow-white, and the front of the open bodice is of white muslin, verging on the green. In all these bright colours, only the hair, the eyelashes and the eyes form dark patches. [[sketch A](#)] I can't manage to do a good croquis of it.

At the exhibition there's a superb painting by Puvis de Chavannes. [[sketch B](#)] The figures are dressed in bright colours and one doesn't know if they're costumes from now or clothes from antiquity; two women are talking (also in long, simple dresses). On one side, artistic-looking men on the other, in the centre a woman, her child in her arms, is picking a flower from an apple tree in blossom. One figure will be forget-me-not blue, another bright lemon, another soft pink, another white, another violet, the ground a meadow dotted with little white and yellow flowers. Blue distance with a white town and a river. All humanity, all nature simplified, but how it could be, if it isn't already.



Devant lui sur une table de jardin rouge des romans jaunes  
 et une fleur de digitale pourpre sombre. mon portrait à moi  
 est presque aussi ainsi mais le bleu est un bleu fin du  
 midi et le vêtement est lilas clair. Le portrait d'arlesienne  
 est d'un ton de chair incolore et mate les yeux calmes et  
 tout simples le vêtement noir le fond rose et elle est <sup>accouplée à</sup> ~~devant~~  
 une table verte avec des livres verts. mais dans l'exemplaire qu'en a  
 Theo. le vêtement est rose le fond blanc jaunâtre et le devant  
 du corsage ouvert de la mousseline d'un <sup>blanc qui tourne sur le</sup> vert. Dans toute  
 ces couleurs claires les cheveux sont les cils et les yeux font des laches  
 noires.



Je ne reussis pas à en faire un bon  
 croquis. Il y a de Puvion de Chavannes à l'expo  
 selon un tableau superbe.



Les personnages sont vêtus de couleurs claires et on ne voit pas de ces costumes  
 de maintenant ou bien des vêtements de l'antiquité. Deux <sup>longues robes simples</sup> ~~personnes~~ causent  
 d'un côté des hommes artistes de l'autre au centre une femme son  
 enfant dans les bras ~~avec~~ ceinture une fleur sur un pommier en fleur  
 une figure sera bleu myosotis une autre citron clair une autre rose  
 tendre une autre blanche une autre violette. Le terrain une  
 prairie peignée de fleurs blanches et jaunes des collines bleues  
 avec une ville blanche et un fleuve. Toute l'humanité toute la nature  
 simplifiée mais comme elle pourrait être si elle ne l'est pas.  
 Cette description ne dit rien - mais en voyant le tableau en le regardant longtemps  
 on croirait assister à une renaissance latente mais bienveillante de  
 toutes choses auxquelles on aurait cru qu'on aurait désirées une renaissance  
 étrange et heureuse des antiquités fort lointaines avec la crue modernité  
 j'ai reçu aussi avec plaisir André Bonjer qui avait l'air fort et calme  
 et raisonnait ma foi avec une grande justesse ~~sur~~ sur des choses artistiques  
 cela me faisait grand plaisir qu'il était venu les jours que j'étais à Paris  
 merci encore de tes lettres ce bonlot je t'embrasse en pensée l. et. Vincent

879A–B (left to right). *Marie Ginoux* ('*The Arlésienne*'); sketch after Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Inter artes et naturam* (*Between art and nature*)

This description doesn't say anything – but by seeing the painting, by looking at it for a long time one would think one was present at an inevitable but benevolent rebirth of all things that one might have believed in, that one might have desired, a strange and happy meeting of the very distant days of antiquity with raw modernity.

I was also pleased to see André Bongér again; he looked strong and calm, and my word reasoned with great accuracy on artistic things, it pleased me very much that he'd come during the days when I was in Paris.

Thank you again for your letters, more soon, I kiss you in thought.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

## **Auvers-sur-Oise, Wednesday, 2 July 1890**

To Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger (letter 896)

My dear Theo and dear Jo.

I've just received the letter in which you say that the child is ill; I'd very much like to come and see you, and what holds me back is the thought that I'd be even more powerless than you are in the given state of distress. But I can feel how very exhausting it must be, and would like to be able to lend a hand. By coming straightaway I fear I would increase the confusion. However, I share your anxieties with all my heart. It's a real pity that at Mr Gachet's the house is so cluttered with all sorts of things. Otherwise I think it would be a good plan to come and lodge here – at his house – with the little one, at least for a good month – I think that the country air has an enormous effect. In the street here there are kids born in Paris and really sickly – who however are well. Coming here to the inn would be possible too, it's true. So that you aren't too alone I could come myself to stay at your place for a week or fortnight.

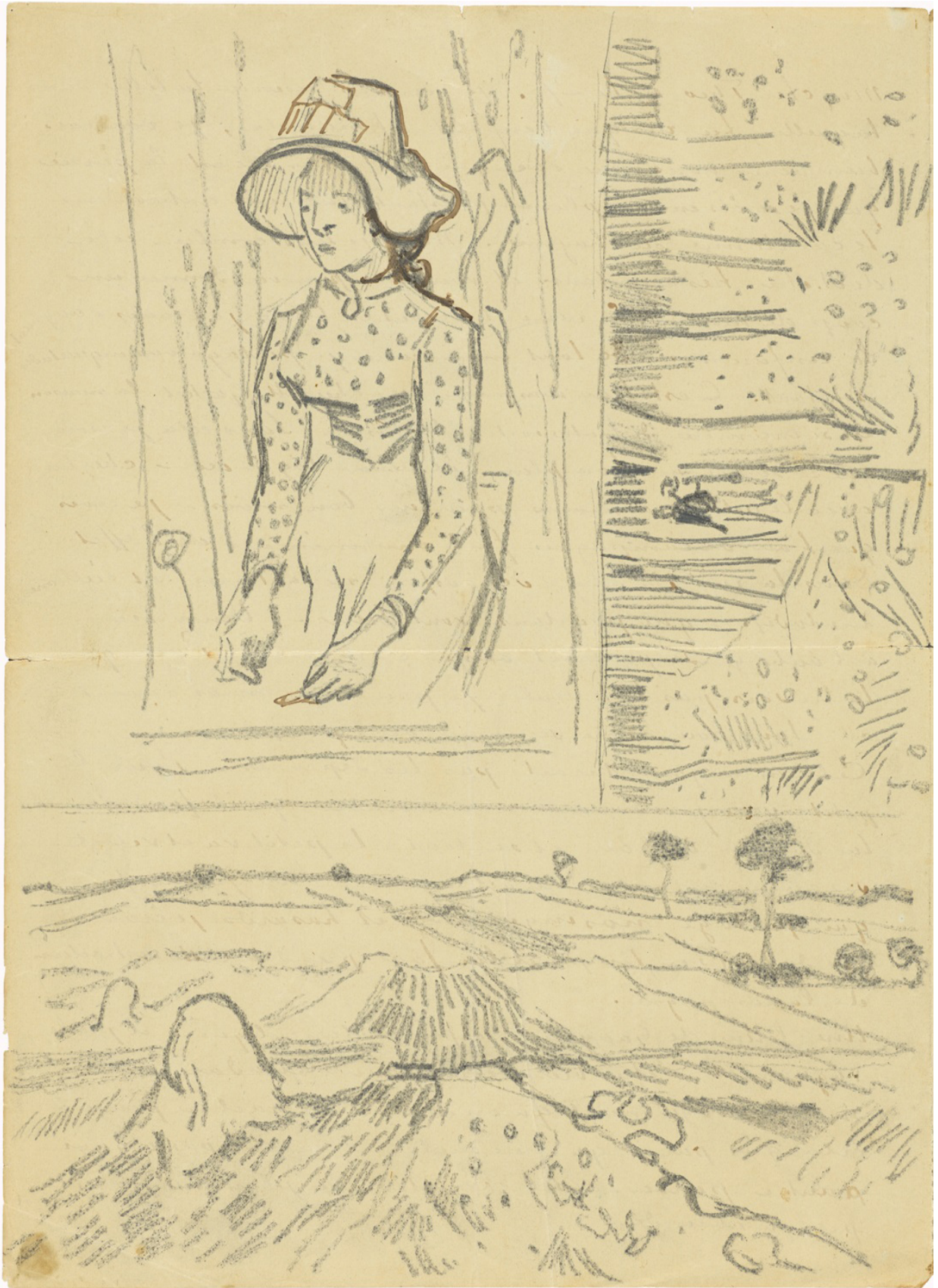
That wouldn't increase the expenses. For the little one, truly I'm beginning to fear that he must be given air, and especially the little bustle of the other children of a village. Surely, Jo too, who shares our anxieties and

risks, I think that from time to time she must take this distraction of the country.

A rather melancholy letter from Gauguin, he talks vaguely of having definitely decided on Madagascar, but so vaguely that one can clearly see that he's only thinking of it because he doesn't really know what else to think about. And the execution of the plan seems almost absurd to me.

[[sketch A – C](#)] Here are three croquis – one of a figure of a peasant woman, big yellow hat with a knot of sky-blue ribbons, very red face. Coarse blue blouse with orange spots, background of ears of wheat.





896A–C (left to right, top to bottom). *Girl against a background of wheat; Couple walking between rows of poplars; Wheatfields*

It's a no. 30 canvas but it's really a little coarse, I fear. Then the horizontal landscape with the fields, a subject like one of Michel's – but then the coloration is soft green, yellow and green-blue. Then undergrowth, violet trunks of poplars which cross the landscape perpendicularly like columns. The depths of the undergrowth are blue, and under the big trunks the flowery meadow, white, pink, yellow, green, long russet grasses and flowers.

The people here at the inn used to live in Paris; there they were constantly indisposed, parents and children, here they never have anything, and especially not the littlest one which came here when it was 2 months old, and then the mother had difficulty in suckling him, while here all of that went well almost immediately. In another respect you work all day long, and at the moment you're probably hardly sleeping. I'd willingly believe that Jo would have twice as much milk here, and that then when she came here one could do without cows, donkeys and other quadrupeds. And as for Jo, so that during the daytime she has company, my word, she could also go and stay just opposite *père* Gachet, perhaps you remember that there's an inn just opposite at the bottom of the slope.

What do you want me to say as regards the future, perhaps, perhaps, without the Boussods?

What will be, will be, you haven't spared yourself trouble for them, you've served them with an exemplary fidelity all the time.

I, too, am trying to do as well as I can, but I don't hide from you that I scarcely dare count on always having the necessary health.

And if my illness recurred you would excuse me, I still love art and life very much, but as to ever having a wife of my own I don't believe in it very strongly. I fear, rather, that towards let's say the age of forty – but let's not say anything – I declare that I know nothing, absolutely nothing, of what turn it may yet take.

But I'm writing to you at once that as regards the little one I think you mustn't worry yourselves excessively; if it's that he's teething, well to make the task easier for him perhaps we could distract him more here where there are children, animals, flowers and good air.

I shake your hand and Jo's firmly in thought, and kiss the little one.

Ever yours,



Vincent

Thank you for the consignment of colours, for the 50-franc note and for the article on the Independents.

An Englishman, Australian, called Walpole Brooke will probably come to see you; he lives at 16 rue de la Grande Chaumière – I told him that you would let him know a time when he could come and see my canvases that are at your place.

He'll probably show you some of his studies, which are still rather lifeless, but however he does observe nature. He has been here in Auvers for months, and we went out together sometimes, he was brought up in Japan, you would never think so from his painting – but that may come.

## **Auvers-sur-Oise, on or about Thursday, 10 July 1890**

To Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger (letter 898)

Dear brother and sister,

Jo's letter was really like a gospel for me, a deliverance from anguish which I was caused by the rather difficult and laborious hours for us all that I shared with you. It's no small thing when all together we feel the daily bread in danger, no small thing when for other causes than that we also feel our existence to be fragile.

Once back here I too still felt very saddened, and had continued to feel the storm that threatens you also weighing upon me. What can be done – you see I usually try to be quite good-humoured, but my life, too, is attacked at the very root, my step also is faltering. I feared – not completely – but a little nonetheless – that I was a danger to you, living at your expense – but Jo's letter clearly proves to me that you really feel that for my part I am working and suffering like you.

There – once back here I set to work again – the brush however almost falling from my hands and – knowing clearly what I wanted I've painted another three large canvases since then. They're immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express

sadness, extreme loneliness. You'll see this soon, I hope – for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I'd almost believe that these canvases will tell you what I can't say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside.

Now the third canvas is Daubigny's garden, a painting I'd been thinking about ever since I've been here.

I hope with all my heart that the planned journey may provide you with a little distraction.

I often think of the little one, I believe that certainly it's better to bring up children than to expend all one's nervous energy in making paintings, but what can you do, I myself am now, at least I feel I am, too old to retrace my steps or to desire something else. This desire has left me, although the moral pain of it remains.

I very much regret not having seen Guillaumin again, but it pleases me that he's seen my canvases.

If I'd waited for him I would probably have stayed to talk with him in such a way as to miss my train.

Wishing you luck and good heart and relative prosperity, please tell Mother and Sister sometime that I think of them very often, besides this morning I have a letter from them and will reply shortly.

Handshakes in thought.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

My money won't last me very long this time, as on my return I had to pay the baggage costs from Arles. I retain very good memories of this trip to Paris. A few months ago I little dared hope to see our friends again. I thought that Dutch lady had a great deal of talent.

Lautrec's painting, portrait of a female musician, is quite astonishing, it moved me when I saw it.

**Auvers-sur-Oise, Wednesday, 23 July 1890**

To Theo van Gogh (letter 902)

My dear brother,

Thanks for your letter of today and for the 50-franc note it contained.

I'd perhaps like to write to you about many things, but first the desire has passed to such a degree, then I sense the pointlessness of it.

I hope that you'll have found those gentlemen favourably disposed towards you.

As regards the state of peace in your household, I'm just as convinced of the possibility of preserving it as of the storms that threaten it.

I prefer not to forget the little French I know, and certainly wouldn't see the point of delving deeper into the rights or wrongs in any discussions on one side or the other. It's just that this wouldn't interest me.

Things go quickly here – aren't Dries, you and I a little more convinced of that, don't we feel it a little more than those ladies? So much the better for them – but anyway, talking with rested minds, we can't even count on that.

As for myself, I'm applying myself to my canvases with all my attention, I'm trying to do as well as certain painters whom I've liked and admired a great deal.

What seems to me on my return – is that the painters themselves are increasingly at bay.

Very well. But has the moment to make them understand the utility of a union not rather passed already? On the other hand a union, if it were formed, would go under if the rest went under. Then you'd perhaps tell me that dealers would unite for the Impressionists; that would be very fleeting. Anyway it seems to me that personal initiative remains ineffective, and having done the experiment, would one begin it again?

I noted with pleasure that the Gauguin from Brittany that I saw was very beautiful, and it seems to me that the others he's done there must be too.

Perhaps you'll see this croquis of Daubigny's garden – it's one of my most deliberate canvases – to it I'm adding a croquis of old thatched roofs and the croquis of 2 no. 30 canvases depicting immense stretches of wheat after the rain. *Hirschig* asked me to ask you please to order the attached list of colours for him from the same colourman you send me. Tasset can send them directly to him, cash on delivery, but then he would have to be given the 20%.

Which would be simplest.

Or you'd put them into the consignment of colours for me, adding the invoice or telling me how much they cost, and then he'd send you the

money. Here one can't find anything good in the way of colours.

I've simplified my own order to a very bare minimum.

Hirschig is beginning to understand a little, it has seemed to me, he's done the portrait of the old schoolmaster, which he gave him, good – and then he has landscape studies which are a little like the Konings at your place as regards colour. It will become completely like that, perhaps, or like the things by Voerman that we saw together.

More soon. Look after yourself, and good luck in business &c. Warm regards to Jo, and handshakes in thought.

Yours truly,  
Vincent.

[[sketch A](#)]

*Daubigny's garden*



le jardin de Daubigny  
 avant plan d'herbe verte & rose  
 à gauche un bouquet vert & lilas et une souche de plante  
 à feuillages blanchâtres Au milieu un parterre  
 de roses. à droite une cloie un mur et au dessus  
 du mur un noisetier à feuillages violet.  
 Puis une haie de lilas une rangée de tulipes arondis  
 jaunes. la maison elle-même dans le fond rose  
 à tout de l'herbe bleue. Un banc et 3 chaises une figure  
 morte à chapeau jaune et sur l'avant plan un chat noir  
 tout vert pâle.



902A. *Daubigny's garden*

Foreground of green and pink grass, on the left a green and lilac bush and a stem of plants with whitish foliage. In the middle a bed of roses. To the right a hurdle, a wall, and above the wall a hazel tree with violet foliage.

Then a hedge of lilac, a row of rounded yellow lime trees. The house itself in the background, pink with a roof of bluish tiles. A bench and 3 chairs, a dark figure with a yellow hat, and in the foreground a black cat. Sky pale green.

[[sketches B–D](#)]



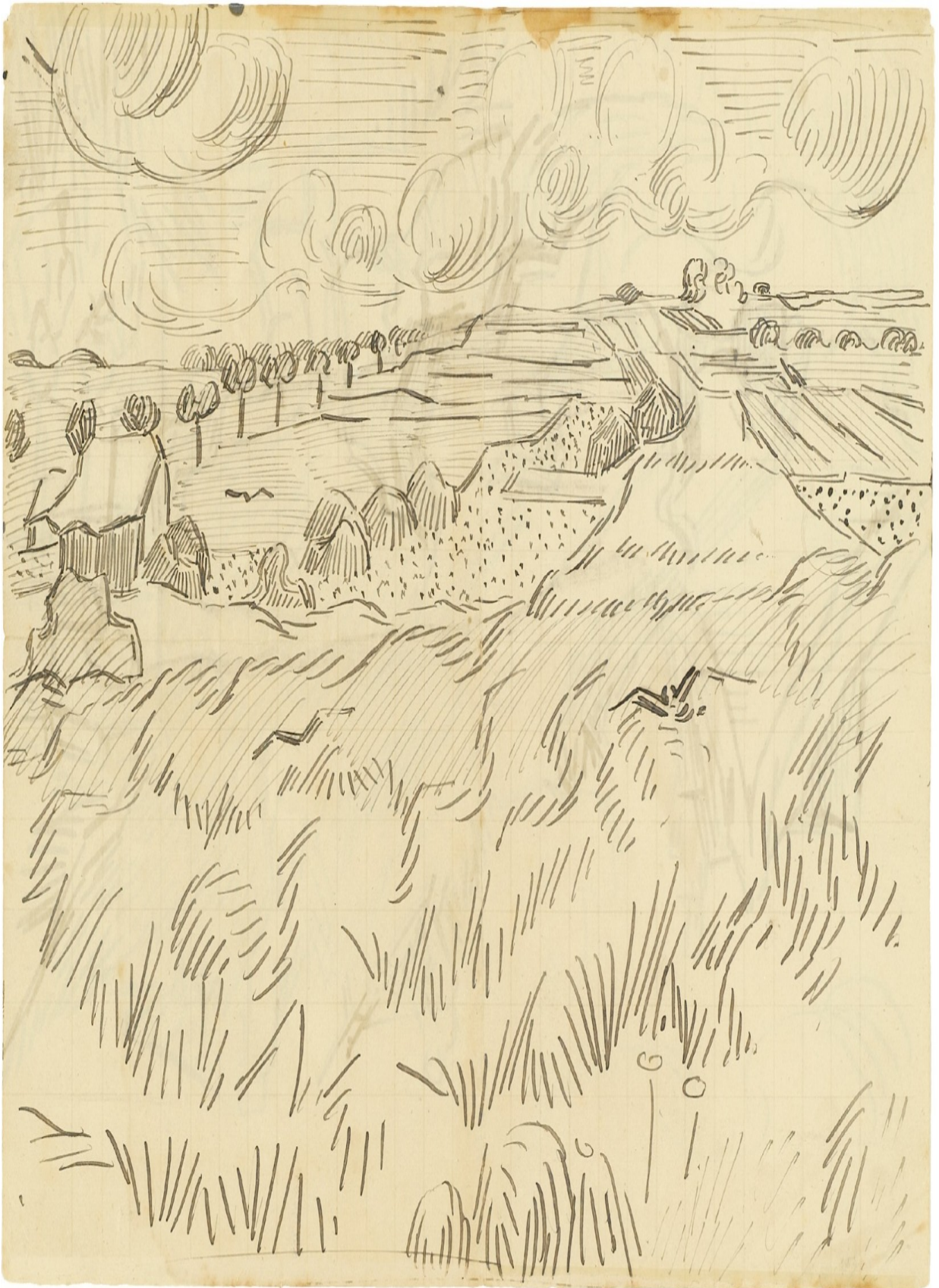
902B. *Wheatfields*





902C. *Thatched cottages and figures*





902D. *Wheatfields*

## Postscript

Theo was at Vincent's deathbed, a broken man. He arranged for his brother's body to be put in a coffin, surrounded by his paintings. On some of them the paint was still wet. Yellow flowers – dahlias and sunflowers – adorned Vincent's coffin.

A dozen friends and acquaintances from Paris attended the funeral on the following day, Wednesday 30 July, at the small cemetery in the field outside Auvers. The funeral cortège made its way from the Ravoux's café to the churchyard, led by a grief-stricken Theo. He was followed by friends of the brothers from Paris, the Ravoux family, and neighbours and other villagers who had known the painter in Auvers.

In the months following Vincent's death, both Theo and his mother received numerous letters from artists, expressing their shock and deepest sympathy.

Theo wrote to his mother two days after the funeral: 'If he could have seen how people behaved toward me when he had left us and the sympathy of so many for himself, he would at this moment not have wanted to die.'

After Vincent's death, Theo had a mission: to cultivate understanding and appreciation for his brother's work. Six weeks after Vincent's death, Theo organized a memorial exhibition of his brother's work at his own apartment in Paris. Theo's many exertions and setbacks meant his own health was now steadily deteriorating too. Shortly after the exhibition, he resigned from Boussod with immediate effect, and promptly suffered a severe nervous breakdown. In October 1890 Theo became mentally deranged, probably as a result of advanced untreated syphilis. He was hospitalized and later transferred to a clinic in Utrecht, where he died in January 1891, six months after Vincent.



M

Monsieur Th. van Gogh et toute sa Famille  
ont la douleur de vous faire part de la perte qu'ils  
viennent de faire en la personne de Monsieur

*Vincent Willem van Gogh*

ARTISTE PEINTRE

décédé, à l'âge de 37 ans, le 29 Juillet 1890, à  
Auvers-sur-Oise,

PARIS, 8, CITÉ FIGALLE

LEYDE, HEERENGRACHT (HOLLANDE)

Card announcing Vincent van Gogh's death





QR

à mon ami  
Elio Van Gogh  
le 29 juillet.  
M. G. G. G.



Paul van Ryssel (Paul-Ferdinand Gachet), *Vincent van Gogh on his deathbed*, 1890

Following Theo's death, his widow Jo moved to the Dutch town of Bussum with her son Vincent Willem, taking Vincent and Theo's art collection with her. Jo sought to raise public awareness of Vincent's paintings in various ways, including exhibition loans to museums all over the world and sales to art dealers and collectors. More and more buyers emerged for Van Gogh's work. In 1914, Jo published Vincent's letters to Theo. That same year she had her husband's remains reinterred in Auvers, in a grave next to his brother's.



Vous êtes prié d'assister aux Convoi, Service et Inhumation de

**Monsieur Vincent VAN GOGH**

ARTISTE PEINTRE

Décédé en son domicile, à Auvers-sur-Oise, le Mardi 29 Juillet 1890, dans sa 37<sup>e</sup> année ;

Qui se feront le Mercredi 30 Juillet, à 2 heures  $\frac{1}{2}$  précises, en l'Eglise d'Auvers-sur-Oise.

On se réunira 2, place de la Mairie, à Auvers-sur-Oise.

*DE PROFUNDIS.*

De la part de : Madame veuve VAN GOGH, sa mère, et de Monsieur Théodore VAN GOGH, son frère.

Départs de Paris-Nord : 7 h. 25, 9 h. 25, 10 h. 25, 11 h. 25, 1 h. 25, ~~2 h. 25~~, ~~3 h. 25~~.

Invitation for the funeral of Vincent van Gogh





ICI REPOSE  
VINCENT VAN GOGH  
—  
1853-1890

ICI REPOSE  
THÉODORE VAN GOGH  
—  
1857-1891

The graves of Vincent and Theo van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise



## Notes on the text

Before 1886 Van Gogh wrote almost all his letters in Dutch, and thereafter almost all in French. Six letters in English survive, of which one (569) is included in this selection. The original language of each letter in this selection is as follows (by letter number):

Dutch: 160, 172, 186, 193, 203, 211, 224, 237, 252, 260, 274, 288, 351, 358, 363, 371, 381, 384, 386, 394, 402, 410, 413, 439, 442, 456, 484, 490, 492, 497, 514, 531, 534, 545, 552, 559, 574, 626, 811

English: 569

French: 155, 487, 587, 592, 602, 611, 620, 622, 628, 632, 638, 651, 677, 691, 695, 706, 726, 728, 730, 739, 743, 756, 764, 776, 782, 790, 798, 801, 822, 850, 853, 863, 877, 879, 896, 898, 902

### **Letter 155**

*My dear Theo* This is the first letter that Van Gogh wrote in French.

*I learned at Etten* In March 1880, Van Gogh had been to stay with his parents in Etten.

*I accepted them* This is the first time in the correspondence that mention is made of Theo's financial contribution to Vincent's upkeep; it was only later that Theo began to provide Vincent with regular financial assistance.

*hard times* Original: 'Les temps difficiles' may be an allusion to the French edition of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. Van Gogh had advised his brother in an earlier letter to read this 'masterly' French translation (letter 153).

*fashionable* Original word written in English.

*in different surroundings* Van Gogh is referring to the years 1869–76, when he worked for the art dealership Goupil & Cie.

*one's country or native land is everywhere* From the passage by Souvestre quoted later in this letter (Emile Souvestre, *Un philosophe sous les toits. Journal d'un homme heureux*, Paris 1867).

*Michelet's La révolution Française* Jules Michelet, *L'histoire de la Révolution française*. 7 vols, Paris 1847–53.

*Aeschylus* Van Gogh derived his knowledge of Greek playwright Aeschylus from Victor Hugo's *William Shakespeare* (1864), a book that had a profound influence on him.

*is sometimes shocking* Original word written in both French and English ('choquant, shocking').

*I admit that it's shocking* 'shocking' is written in English.

*the abomination of desolation* Matt. 24:15 and Mark 13:14.

*a system of circumlocution* An allusion to the Circumlocution Office in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857).

*the inside of a church* Original words written in both French and English. Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part I, act 3, scene 3.

Dickens's 'Richard Cartone' Van Gogh confuses two names: Richard Carstone appears in Dickens's *Bleak House*; Sydney Carton is the protagonist of *A Tale of Two Cities* (published in French as *Paris & Londres en 1793*).

*How long, O Lord Isa.* 6:11.

*have salt in ourselves* Mark 9:50.

Souvestre's *Le philosophe* Emile Souvestre, *Un philosophe sous les toits. Journal d'un homme heureux*, Paris 1867, p. 190.

*the best way of knowing God* Cf. 1 John 5:1–2.

*the things he sees with his eyes* Cf. Matt. 13:16.

*Me, I have everything I need* This is clearly meant to be sarcastic.

*my address is care of C. Decrucq* Van Gogh rented a room at rue du Pavillon 3 (not 8) in Cuesmes from the mine-worker Charles Louis Decrucq.

## Letter 160

*I went to see Mr Roelofs* Willem Roelofs was a Dutch artist who occupied an influential position in the artistic life of the city.

*the examples of Bague* Charles Bague created a series of drawing examples published by Goupil & Cie: *Cours de dessin. Avec le concours de J.-L. Gérôme*. Paris 1868–70, and *Exercices au fusain pour préparer à l'étude de l'académie d'après nature*. Paris 1871.

*A manual written by Zahn* A. de Zahn [Albert von Zahn], *Esquisses anatomiques à l'usage des artistes pour servir aux études d'après nature et d'après l'antique* (1865).

*To be admitted to the drawing academy* From 15 December 1880, Van Gogh was enrolled as a student at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Bruxelles for the course 'Drawing from antiquity: torso and fragments'.

*Uncle Cent or Uncle Cor* Vincent van Gogh (Uncle Vincent or Uncle Cent) and Cornelis (Cor) Marinus van Gogh (Uncle Cor or C.M.), brothers of Van Gogh's father, Theodorus van Gogh.

*some steady work* Van Gogh's goal was to become an illustrator of books or magazines.

*Also went to see Mr Van Rappard* Anthon Gerard Alexander van Rappard, a Dutch artist whom Theo must have met in Paris.

*an extract from the work by Lavater and Gall* presumably Alexandre Ysabeau, *Lavater et Gall. Physiognomie et phrénologie rendues intelligibles pour tout le monde* (Paris 1862).

*a photo by Braun that I found at Schmidt's* Braun was a publisher of reproductions after paintings. Tobias Victor Schmidt (1842–1903) was a manager at Goupil & Cie in Brussels.

*That Mr Schmidt* The family correspondence makes no mention whatever of this money matter.

## Letter 172

*Mauve* Anton Mauve (1838–88), a Dutch artist, married to Vincent's cousin Jet Carbentus.

*Piet Kaufmann the labourer* In 1934 Kaufmann had his memoirs recorded in detail by Frans Schuerweghs. He said that he had posed dozens of times in numerous places: 'Whenever I posed and the work was finished, Vincent asked how much he owed me. I answered: "Nothing, Vincent". "Well, Piet, then we're done," he would say, satisfied...'.

*Bargue's Exercices au fusain* Charles Bargue, *Exercices au fusain pour préparer à l'étude de l'académie d'après nature*. Paris (Goupil & Cie) 1871.

*Conté in wood* A generic name for artificially produced chalk enclosed in a cylinder of wood, like a pencil.

*with the brush and the stump* A stump is a rolled-up piece of chamois or paper, pointed at both ends, used to rub pencil or chalk drawings in order to obtain nuances, such as shadow effects.

## Letter 186

*a French book by Michelet* In *L'Amour* (1858) and *La Femme* (1860) Jules Michelet argues that a woman can only really be happy within marriage and under the guidance of the right man.

*Uncle Stricker* Kee Vos's father, Johannes Paulus Stricker Sr (J.P.S. or Uncle Stricker), married to one of Van Gogh's maternal aunts, Aunt Mina.

'wall of partition' Eph. 2:14.

## Letter 193

*When I went to see M.* Anton Mauve.

*all things are made new again* Cf. Rev. 21:5.

*petty vexations of human life* The phrase is borrowed from the popular, humorous book *Petites misères de la vie humaine* by Old Nick and Grandville (1843).

*the Rev. Ten Kate* Jan Jacob Lodewijk ten Kate, *Goethe's Faust* (1878).

*strawberries in the spring* This expression originated with Theo.

*Jan, the very learned professor* Kee's brother, Johannes Andries Stricker, was employed as a lecturer.

*the exhibition at Arti* The artists' society Arti et Amicitiae, Amsterdam.

*little Jan Vos* Kee's 8-year-old son.

*Aunt M* Aunt Mina (Willemina C.G. Stricker-Carbentus), Kee's mother and Vincent's maternal aunt.

*I recently read Michelet* Jules Michelet, *Du prêtre, de la femme, de la famille* (1845).

'*She and no other*' This phrase was taken from Jules Michelet's *L'amour*.

*not the infinite of the moment* This phrase was taken from Jules Michelet's *L'amour*.

*no such thing as an old woman* Taken from Jules Michelet's *L'amour*.

*'meanwhile looking for another lass'* A remark made by Uncle Stricker.

*'O God, there is no God'* A reference to the closing line of 'Prayer of an unbeliever. From the diary of a madman' (1861) by Multatuli (pseudonym of Eduard Douwes Dekker), a poem that was especially popular among free-thinkers; it was reprinted many times in socialist and anarchist circles.

*the beams in our own eye* Cf. Matt. 7:3–5 and Luke 6:41–42.

*something good in all movement* Taken from the poem 'Onvermoeid' (Tireless) by P.A. de Génestet (1829–61).

*on Peter's barque* Before he became an apostle, Simon Petrus was a 'fisher' (Matt. 4:18).

*'the goodness of the Lord'* Cf. Ps. 27:13.

*'the Tigris and the Euphrates'* Two large rivers in Asia Minor, which converge at Qurna, Iraq, and then flow into the Persian Gulf.

*how he had married A. and Lecomte* The marriage ceremony of Vincent's cousin Anna Carpentus to the painter Adolf Lecomte was performed by Uncle Stricker on 14 July 1881.

*Father Bernhard* Probably Cornelius Johannes van Zuijlen, who was known as Pater (Father) Bernhard, a clergyman in The Hague.

## **Letter 203**

*When I was in Brussels* Van Gogh was in Brussels from October 1880 to April 1881.

*she charges a daalder* 1.50 guilders.

## **Letter 211**

*Tersteeg* Manager of the Goupil gallery in The Hague, Vincent's employer between 1869 and 1873 and later Theo's.

*C.M. Cornelis (Cor)* Marinus van Gogh (Uncle Cor); art dealer and bookseller in Amsterdam.

*Degroux* Charles Degroux, Belgian artist. Emile Leclercq described the artist as a solitary man who had turned his back on the world, who identified strongly with the deprived people he portrayed and whose depictions of hardship and abuse were distasteful to some people.

*a rijksdaalder* 2.50 guilders.

*I was at Pulchri this evening* The Dutch painter, musician, improviser and speaker Anton (Tony) Lodewijk George Offermans (1854–1911) produced the farce at The Hague artists' society Pulchri.

*Here's a list of Dutch paintings* In the 1870s and 1880s, paintings by Dutch artists destined for the annual Salon in Paris were exhibited for a few days before being sent to Paris.

*Israëls, an old man* Jozef Israëls, *An old man – Fisher (Old friends)* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, William L. Elkins Collection).

*Tom Carlyle* English writer and philosopher Thomas Carlyle wrote *The French Revolution* (1837) and edited the 1845 edition of Oliver Cromwell's letters and speeches.

*Longfellow* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, American poet. Taken from his poem 'My lost youth'.

*to know how to suffer* The source of this quotation is not known. Van Gogh cites it again in other letters.

*HGT* i.e., Tersteeg – see note above.

#### **Letter 224**

*I met a pregnant woman* Clasina (Sien, Christien) Maria Hoornik.

*I did what the hand found to do* Eccl. 9:10.

*another woman for whom my heart beats* Kee Vos.

#### **Letter 237**

*Municipal hospital* Van Gogh had been admitted on 7 June. The official diagnosis, as stated in the patients' register, was 'Gonorrhoea'.

*sent to Geel* In 1880 Van Gogh's father had considered having Vincent committed to an asylum in Geel.

*a ward of court* The Van Gogh family evidently intended to use Vincent's financial incompetence as the basis for committing him.

#### **Letter 252**

*Princenhage* Uncle Vincent and Aunt Cornelia lived in Princenhage.

*Het Heike* Het Heike (St Willibrorddorp) is a town about 3 km southwest of Etten.

#### **Letter 260**

*the book about Gavarni* Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Gavarni, l'homme et l'oeuvre* (1868).

*I sit with a white board* Van Gogh means painting paper pinned to a board.

*such as Zola describes* Van Gogh may be referring to Zola's *L'assommoir* (1877).

#### **Letter 274**

*La bohème* Theo probably mentioned Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851).

*Tassaert* Nicolas Tassaert was a French artist who committed suicide.



*How you might become a very good painter* Vincent had suggested in an earlier letter that Theo would be a good painter.

### Letter 288

*a book by Murger* Henri Murger's novel *Les buveurs d'eau* (1854) refers to a group of (fictional) artists in Paris's Quartier Latin.

*Nanteuil, Baron, Roqueplan, Tony Johannot* French artists active in the mid-nineteenth century.

*Claude Lantier* A character in Zola's novel *Le ventre de Paris* (1873), which Van Gogh had read a few months before. He is also the protagonist of Zola's *L'oeuvre* (1886), partly based on Paul Cézanne. This is the first time that Van Gogh uses the term 'Impressionism'.

*Victor Hugo by Bonnat* Léon Bonnat's portrait *Victor Hugo* (1879) was extremely well known.

*And I, I was silent* Victor Hugo's poem 'La légende des siècles' (1859): 'I watched him in the funereal mists / As one might see a blackcock keep silent in the gloom.'

*a little general of '93* Napoleon Bonaparte.

*seen in a dark mirror* Cf. 1 Cor. 13:12.

*Uncle Tom's cabin* Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The novel was available in several French translations.

*your Montmartre* Theo had sent a description of Montmartre.

*God does it for everyone* Cf. Deut. 29:4.

*Carlyle* Thomas Carlyle, *Past and present* (1897).

*the men of 93* Those who suppressed the royalist rising in 1793, about which Van Gogh had recently read in Victor Hugo's *Quatre-vingt-treize* (Ninety-Three, 1874).

*one of those on watch* Cf. 1 Thess. 5:6.

### Letter 351

*since his visit* Van Gogh's father visited him in the middle of May.

*Ma was at Princenhage* Uncle Vincent and Aunt Cornelia lived in Princenhage.

*you ought to be loyal to the woman* Theo's girlfriend Marie in Paris.

### Letter 358

*the hundred masterpieces* Theo must have written about an exhibition at the dealer Georges Petit's premises at 12 rue Godot de Mauroy on 12 June 1883. There were works by Corot (14 pieces), Daubigny (6), Decamps (9), Delacroix (7), Diaz (4), Dupré (4), Fortuny (7), Fromentin (4), Meissonier (7), Millet (6), Rousseau (13), Troyon (9) and others, among them thirty old masters.

*Aeschylus* Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare* (1864), p. 177.

*the two Greens* Charles Green (1840–98) and Henry Towneley Green (1836–99), English artists.

*collier's faith* The uncomplicated perseverance of humble folk. According to Van Gogh, this expression was used often by Millet.

*The Pictorial News* Probably *The Pictorial World. An Illustrated Weekly Newspaper*.

*Our little man* Sien's son Willem was born on 2 July 1882.

### **Letter 363**

*autographs* Prints of the lithographs drawn in autographic ink.

*Leurs and Stam* Sellers of artists' materials in The Hague.

### **Letter 381**

*the Drawing Society* The Dutch Drawing Society (Hollandsche Teeken-Maatschappij) was founded in The Hague in 1876 by several members of Pulchri Studio.

*to go to England* Van Gogh planned to seek work in England as an illustrator.

### **Letter 384**

*C.M.* Cornelius Marinus van Gogh (Uncle Cor).

*the proposed arrangement* Uncle Cor paid an advance on the drawings sent to him. If he sold enough for Vincent to be able to share in the profits, he would send the money to Theo.

### **Letter 394**

*drawing impossible windmills* Van Gogh could have meant either literally 'drawing impossible windmills' (drawing windmills features later in the letter) or figuratively 'getting ideas that are impossible to achieve' (cf. 'drawing castles in the air').

*When I was in London* Van Gogh worked for Goupil & Cie in London from June 1873 to May 1875.

*Boks* Marinus Boks, a pupil of Mauve, was admitted to the Geneeskundig Gesticht voor Krankzinnigen (Insane Asylum) in The Hague in 1881.

*where your roots are from an early age* Theo joined Goupil in 1873 at the age of 15.

*Wil* Willemina (Wil or Willemien) Jacoba van Gogh, Van Gogh's sister.

*We are today what we were yesterday* Taken from Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*.

### **Letter 402**

*It takes time to get it changed* The money that Theo sent had to be cashed or changed at a post office or bank in Hoogeveen.

### **Letter 410**

*when Pa banned me from the house* After a disagreement with his father, Van Gogh left his parents' home at Christmas in 1881.

*to do as the Rappards did* It would appear that Van Rappard was given the financial opportunity (by his family) to devote himself to his art.

### **Letter 413**

*no feelings, though* A pun on the 'fijngevoelig' ('finer feelings') mentioned a few lines earlier.

*Enclosed is the letter* Van Gogh started on a fresh sheet – the 'enclosed letter' refers to the first part up to here.

*Money can be repaid* This sentence derives from two lines from the poem 'Enoch Arden' by Alfred Tennyson: 'He will repay you: money can be repaid; / Not kindness such as yours.'

*A door has to be open or shut* French proverb ('Une porte doit être ouverte ou fermé').

*'the male is very wild'* Michelet quotes this sentence in *L'amour*.

### **Letter 439**

*'slow of speech'* Cf. Exod. 4:10.

*beyond the paint* A common expression among artists at the time.

*Numa Roumestan* Alphonse Daudet's novel *Numa Roumestan – Moeurs parisiennes* (1881).

*when he opened his own art school* English artist Hubert von Herkomer set up his Art School in Bushey in 1883.

*Lions do not ape one another* Great minds do not imitate. Van Gogh probably derived this saying from Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare* (1864).

*Son en Breugel* The villages of Son and Breugel, about 5 km to the northwest of Nuenen.

*Bretons* French artist and poet Jules Adolphe Aimé Louis Breton and his wife Elodie Breton-De Vigne.

*De Génestet* An allusion to P.A. de Génestet's poem 'Waar en hoe' (Where and how).

### **Letter 456**

*you seemed to have understood my letter* During Theo's visit the brothers had fallen out about Vincent's behaviour: Vincent apparently lashed out 'furiously' at his brother one evening. Their father wrote to Theo on 22 August 1884: '[Vincent] is overwrought, whether it is related to other things – I should almost think it is.'

*Miss Begemann has taken poison* A relationship had developed during the summer between Vincent and Margot Begemann, who lived next door to the Van Goghs. The suicide attempt must have happened a few days before Van Gogh wrote this letter.

*a question of marriage* Mr van Gogh wrote to Theo on 2 October 1884: 'We have had difficult days with Vincent again. Apparently he wanted to arrange a marriage with Margot, who proved not entirely averse, but it came up against insuperable objections, on the part of her family too.'

*Mme Bovary* Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary. Moeurs de province* (1857).

*Dr van de Loo* Arnold van de Loo was the Van Gogh family doctor.

*on a trip for the firm* Margot was a partner in her brother Louis's linen mill.

*Oh, that mysticism* In another letter there is a suggestion that Margot might be suffering from religious mania.

## **Letter 484**

*to enter it for the Salon* Vincent had rejected Theo's previous proposal – in March 1884 – to submit work to the Salon.

## **Letter 490**

*Cor Cornelis (Cor)* Vincent van Gogh, Van Gogh's brother.

*the incident with Anna* Willemien later wrote to a friend: '[Vincent's] disappointments often embittered him and made him not a normal person...after my father's death Anna thought it would be more peaceful for Ma if he were not to live at home any longer and contrived that he left us. He took that so badly that we have heard nothing from him since then and we only know about him through Theo.'

*keep my hand to my plough* Cf. Luke 9:62.

*what I read about Delacroix* Jean Gigoux, *Causeries sur les artistes de mon temps* (1885, p. 68). Theo had sent Vincent the book.

*you've had to do exceptional things* On the day of Mr van Gogh's death Theo had withdrawn 1000 francs from his current account.

*when settling affairs* Winding up Mr van Gogh's estate. Vincent did cede his share of the inheritance; in March 1889 it was these very 'youngsters' – Lies and Willemien – who made their shares available to Vincent when he was ill.

## **Letter 492**

*on gilt Bristol* A thick paper used for drawing.

*'the valiant ones'* Gigoux's description of the generation of Delacroix, in *Causeries sur les artistes de mon temps* (1885, p. 68).

*Le Chat Noir* A Parisian satirical weekly magazine published from 1882 to 1895.

#### **Letter 497**

*your birthday* Theo turned 28 on 1 May 1885.

*'act and create'* *'agir-cr  er'* (French original), taken from Zola's novel *Au bonheur des dames*.

*an acquaintance of mine in Eindhoven* Anton Kerssemakers (1846–1924), a tanner in Eindhoven, and pupil of Van Gogh.

*that Salon issue* Theo must have promised to send the special issue of *L'Illustration* about the Salon, which came out on 25 April 1885.

#### **Letter 514**

*the lithograph I sent you* *The potato eaters* (F 1661 / JH 737).

*'the knowledge – nobody has it'* Taken from an article in *La Nouvelle Revue* 6, November–December 1884. An admirer had written in an ode: 'You have the knowledge' (Vous avez la science), whereupon Meissonier wrote him a letter, saying: 'No! I do not have the knowledge, one never has it!' (Non! je n'ai pas la science, on ne l'a jamais!).

*the last time you were here* Van Rappard stayed in Nuenen in October 1884.

#### **Letter 531**

*the two new Lhermites* Very probably in *Le Monde Illustr  *.

*Poussin, Bracquemond* Bracquemond discusses Poussin in the chapter 'D  coration, d  corateur' in his *Du dessin et de la couleur* (1885).

*A girl I'd often painted* Gordina de Groot, who modelled for Van Gogh several times.

#### **Letter 534**

*the museum* The Rijksmuseum, which had opened at its new location in July.

*the Night watch* Rembrandt, *The Night Watch*, 1642.

*the Syndics* Rembrandt, *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild*, 1662.

*Frans Hals, P. Codde* The painting is *The company of Captain Reynier Reael and Lieutenant Cornelis Michielsz. Blaeuw* ('*The meagre company*') by Frans Hals and Pieter Codde (1637). Theo had visited Amsterdam at the beginning of August.



*Orange, white, blue* The colours of William I, Prince of Orange, the founder of the Dutch state; used for the Dutch flag.

*the singer, that laughing chap* *Young Man Playing the Lute*. At the time it was believed to be by Frans Hals, but is now thought to be a copy of *The Lute Player* (Musée du Louvre).

*the man in yellow* Frans Hals, *The Merry Drinker*, c. 1628–30. Van Gogh borrowed the term ‘citron amorti’ (dull lemon) from De Goncourt’s *Chérie* (1884), where an artist talks of ‘la nuance citron amorti’, a fashionable colour in the eighteenth century.

*Rembrandt’s Jewish bride* Rembrandt, *The Jewish Bride* (c. 1666). W. Bürger was the pseudonym of Etienne Joseph Théophile Thoré (1807–69), a French art critic.

*Rembrandt – magician* Jules Michelet, in *L’amour* (book 5, chapter 4), refers to ‘The powerful magician, Rembrandt’.

*De Goncourt – Chérie* Edmond de Goncourt, *Chérie* (1884).

*the Fodor* The Fodor collection, now housed in the Amsterdam Museum.

*they think my studies are too black* The reactions of people to whom Theo had showed Vincent’s work in Paris, among them the art dealer Alphonse Portier and artist Charles Serret.

*that friend of mine in Eindhoven* Anton Kerssemakers. See note to letter 497.

*Bürger, Musées de la Hollande* W. Bürger (Etienne Joseph Théophile Thoré), *Musées de la Hollande. Amsterdam et La Haye* (1858) and *Musées de la Hollande, II. Musée Van der Hoop à Amsterdam et Musée de Rotterdam* (1860). C.M. (Cornelis Marinus van Gogh, Uncle Cor) had a bookshop and art gallery in Amsterdam.

*lash a broom to the mast* A broom tied to the mast was the symbol of Holland’s mastery of the seas.

## **Letter 545**

*October by Lhermitte* *Le Monde Illustré*, a leading French illustrated news magazine, published a series of ‘Les mois rustiques’. *Figaro Illustré* was another illustrated news supplement.

*second volume of De Goncourt* Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, *L’art du dix-huitième siècle* (1859).

## **Letter 552**

*two large paintings by Rubens* Both paintings are in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp.

*Gil Blas* A left-leaning periodical. Zola’s *L’oeuvre* appeared in *Gil Blas* in 80 instalments, from 23 December 1885 to 27 March 1886.

## **Letter 559**

*they’re going to start packing in March* At the end of March they were due to move from Nuenen to Breda.

*not to start from the outline* Taken from Jean Gigoux, *Causeries sur les artistes de mon temps* (1885).

*I sent you Chérie* Edmond de Goncourt, *Chérie* (1884).

*Cent chefs d'oeuvre* This was one of the annual 'Expositions Internationales' mounted by Georges Petit in 8 rue de Sèze since 1882.

*the Delacroix exhibition* At the Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris 1885.

*the Meissonier exhibition* At the Galerie Georges Petit, Paris 1884.

## **Letter 569**

*Mr Livens* The Englishman Horace Mann Livens went to study at the Antwerp Academy in 1885 during the time that Van Gogh was living and studying there.

*the Impressionists* In his letters Van Gogh uses the term 'Impressionism' in a very general sense for all forms of modern art.

*Claude Monet* Theo handled Monet's work from 1885 onwards.

*frankly green, frankly blue* For 'frankly' read 'really'.

*my lodgings and studio* At the beginning of June 1886 the Van Gogh brothers had moved to a larger apartment at 54 rue Lepic in Montmartre. Vincent had his own studio there.

*I may be going to the south of France* Van Gogh did not go to Arles until February 1888.

*Allan, Briët, Rink, Durand* Henry Allan, Arthur Henri Christiaan Briët, Paulus Philippus Rink and Ernest Durand were fellow students at the academy in Antwerp.

*four dealers who have exhibited studies of mine* From a later letter it emerges that Van Gogh exhibited work at the paint merchant Julien Tanguy's shop and with the art dealers Pierre Firmin Martin and Georges Thomas. We do not know who the fourth dealer was.

## **Letter 574**

*Why seek ye the living among the dead* Luke 24:5–6.

*the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs* This probably refers to his 'love affair' with Agostina Segatori.

*Margot Begemann* In September 1884 Van Gogh had proposed to Margot Begemann, who lived next door to his parents in Nuenen.

*A la recherche du bonheur* Ljev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, *A la recherche du bonheur* (In Pursuit of Happiness; French translation, Paris 1886).

*like vitriol and sugar* This derives from Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1885).

## **Letter 587**

*bouillabaisse and aioli* A regional fish soup served with garlic-flavoured mayonnaise (aioli).

## Letter 592

*sans-culottes* The revolutionaries in the French Revolution of the eighteenth century.

*a pundle of thousand vrenc pills* The comic spelling was prompted by Mourier-Petersen's accent, which Van Gogh joked about.

*an Impressionist of the Petit Boulevard* Van Gogh described Degas, Monet, Renoir, Sisley and Camille Pissarro as 'Impressionists of the Grand Boulevard' because their reputations were already established and their work was exhibited by renowned galleries in or near the chic boulevards around place de l'Opéra. By 'Petit Boulevard' he was referring to the neighbourhood around boulevard de Clichy and boulevard de Rochechouart in Montmartre, where the younger men had their studios and exhibited in cafés.

*a bad business with Vignon* It has not been possible to ascertain what Vincent is talking about here – evidently discussed by Theo in a previous letter.

## Letter 602

*today I rented the right-hand wing* Van Gogh rented the right-hand side of this house at number 2 place Lamartine, on the northern edge of the city. He set up his studio in it, but did not start living there until September, once the house had been redecorated and furnished.

*La recherche du Bonheur* The story 'Le Moujik Pakhom. Faut-il beaucoup de terre pour un homme?' from Tolstoy's *A la recherche du bonheur* is about a man who is given the chance to buy, for a small sum, the amount of land he can walk round in one day. After running flat out all day to get as much land as possible, he drops dead.

*despite the 100 franc note* Van Gogh had thanked Theo for sending 100 francs in an earlier letter.

*the very simple things I've asked those people for* Van Gogh meant the owners of Hotel-Restaurant Carrel, where he was staying and where he took his meals.

*Perhaps Gauguin will come to the south* This is the first time Vincent raises the possibility of sharing a studio with Gauguin, who at this point was in Pont-Aven in Brittany.

*Breda* Their mother and their sister Willemien lived in Breda.

## Letter 611

*your visit to Gruby* Dr Gruby evidently diagnosed the 'heart condition', about which nothing further is explained. Potassium iodide, which Theo was taking, was a widely prescribed remedy for a cough, something from which he frequently suffered, but was also much used in cases of cerebral syphilis, the disease that may have been the cause of Theo's death in January 1891.

*Rivet* A doctor in Paris.

*my friend the Dane* Christian Mourier-Petersen.

*Mme the Countess De la Boissière* In 1886 Eugène Levallant de la Boissière, his wife Clara and their 12-year-old daughter were registered as the occupants of an apartment on the first floor of 1 boulevard de Clichy in Asnières. Nothing more is known about the family.

*Perruchot* A restaurant owner and wine merchant in Asnières.

## **Letter 620**

*We'll still have to write to Gauguin* Theo's letter must have raised objections to the draft letter to Gauguin that Vincent had enclosed with an earlier letter.

*these idiots in Dordrecht* Van Gogh is referring to the organizers of the second exhibition of the Nederlandsche Etsclub in the galleries of the artists' society Arti et Amicitiae in Amsterdam, which opened on Friday, 1 June 1888. Jan Veth had asked Theo to lend works. Acting for Boussod, Valadon & Cie, Theo loaned works by Degas and Lançon, and from his own collection works by Forain, Pissarro, Raffaëlli and Seurat.

*Not even with the frame* A perspective frame, an artist's aid.

*the distinguished Albert* The art collector and connoisseur of Oriental art Albert Goupil, the son of Adolphe Goupil. Albert was a member of the board of Goupil & Cie between 1872 and 1884, and he and his father were sleeping partners in the new firm of Boussod, Valadon & Cie.

*rue de la Paix* On this chic shopping street were art dealers, fashion houses and jewellers.

## **Letter 622**

*the German musicians* Van Gogh would have been thinking first and foremost of Richard Wagner; he was in the middle of reading a book about him.

*Daudet's Tartarin* Alphonse Daudet, *Aventures prodigieuses de Tartarin de Tarascon* (1872).

*Fromentin and Gérôme* Fromentin had painted in Algeria; Gérôme in Turkey, Greece and Egypt.

## **Letter 626**

*whether I had submitted something to Arti* The second exhibition of the Nederlandsche Etsclub, which opened in Arti et Amicitiae in Amsterdam on 1 June 1888. See letter 620.

*Domela Nieuwenhuis* The Dutch minister Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis left the church in 1879 and devoted himself to fighting for human rights.

*tulip mania* An example of speculative buying and selling of a product solely for profit.

*there's always an exhibition of Impressionists nowadays* Theo had regularly exhibited and dealt in work by Monet, Pissarro, Degas and others since 1887.

*Anatomy for artists* John Marshall, *Anatomy for artists* (1878).

*There are Parisian ladies among the Impressionists* Van Gogh is probably referring to Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot.

*Madame Chrysanthème* Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème* (1888).

*Van Eeden's book* Frederik van Eeden, *De kleine Johannes* (1887).

*Vosmaer* Evidently Willemien had mentioned the death of Carel Vosmaer; the writer had died on 12 June 1888. Van Gogh had previously registered his disapproval of Vosmaer.

*flowers from Menton* Uncle Vincent and Aunt Cornelia sometimes sent fresh flowers from Menton in the south of France.

### Letter 628

*Zouaves* Light infantry of the French army, linked with North Africa. Paul Eugène Milliet was due to leave for Guelma in Algeria on 1 November 1888.

*Daudet's Le Nabab* Alphonse Daudet, *Le Nabab* (1877).

### Letter 632

*This great artist – Christ* Whether he knew it or not, Van Gogh's ideas tied in with the Renaissance view that Christ was an artist.

*Asnières* A district north of Paris where Bernard's parents lived. Van Gogh and Bernard painted there together in 1887.

*Delacroix's beautiful painting* Eugène Delacroix, *Christ asleep during the tempest* (c. 1853).

*Benjamin-Constant* Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant (1845–1902) had a studio in Montmartre.

*John the Baptist by Puvis* Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1869). Van Gogh had seen the painting at an exhibition at Durand-Ruel's in late 1887 when he and Bernard were going around together in Paris.

*that second lieutenant* Paul Eugène Milliet, lieutenant in the Zouaves (see letter 628).

*The sonnets are going well* Emile Bernard wrote some poems on the back of his drawing *Brothel scene*.

### Letter 638

*my friend the second lieutenant* Paul Eugène Milliet, lieutenant in the Zouaves (see letter 628).

*Zola's Paradou* In Emile Zola's *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875) 'Le Paradou' is an idyllic garden.

*you see them in Japanese albums* In Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1888), which Van Gogh was reading at the time, there are similar illustrations of cicadas.

*père Tanguy* Julien François Tanguy (known as 'père Tanguy') (1825–94) was a seller of artists' materials in Paris, who counted several Impressionist painters (as well as Van Gogh) among his customers. 'Mère Tanguy' was his wife.

*Xantippe* Xantippe was the wife of the Greek philosopher Socrates; her name is synonymous with a spiteful woman or shrew.

*Institut Pasteur* Louis Pasteur had discovered a rabies vaccine in 1885. The institute named after him opened in Paris in 1888. There was a ward for treating patients infected with rabies.



*the time of the Silent One and of Marnix* William the Silent (William I of Orange) and Philips van Marnix, Lord of Sint Aldegonde, William's right-hand man. The League of Nobles refers to the petition (the 'compromise') that was presented to the governor-general, Margaret of Parma, in 1566.

*père Martin* The art dealer Pierre Firmin Martin.

*Guy de Maupassant* 'La rouille' was published in *Gil Blas* in 1882.

*Pangloss* A character in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).

*the Nouvelle Athènes* Café in the place Pigalle in Paris, where the group of artists and writers around Manet, Degas and Desboutin met regularly.

### **Letter 651**

*Velázquez and Goya* Van Gogh was here thinking above all of the paintings by Velázquez and Goya in the Louvre, with which he and Bernard were familiar.

*Hals* Van Gogh had got to know works by Frans Hals from reproductions when he was working at Goupil & Cie, as well as from the originals in the museum in Haarlem, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Louvre in Paris.

*never did he paint voluptuous and bestial naked women* This passage was prompted by Van Gogh's objections to Bernard's works of these subjects.

*Paradise* The third and final part of Dante's *Divine comedy* (1313–21).

### **Letter 677**

*I worked at furnishing the house* At Vincent's request Theo had sent him 300 francs to furnish the Yellow House.

*the postman and his wife* Joseph and Augustine Roulin.

*Tartarin* The main character of Alphonse Daudet's satirical novels *Tartarin sur les Alpes* (1885) and *Tartarin de Tarascon* (1872).

*the Revue Indépendante* Félix Fénéon and Edouard Dujardin regularly staged small exhibitions in the offices of the monthly magazine *La Revue Indépendante* at 11 rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin.

### **Letter 691**

*Bouvard et Pécuchet* Gustave Flaubert's unfinished novel (1881).

*what you do in private* Alongside his job at Boussod, Valadon & Cie, where he dealt in the work of established artists, Theo also supported modern artists by buying their work for his own collection and offering them accommodation.

### **Letter 695**

*your portrait* Paul Gauguin, *Self-portrait with portrait of Bernard*, 'Les misérables', 1888.

***the Petit Boulevard*** See note for Letter 592.

*the Belgian Vingtistes* The artists' association 'Les Vingt'.

*the cult of Venus* Van Gogh took the Roman statue of the Venus of Arles as an example of the classical remains in the town.

### **Letter 706**

*this reason you give* Gauguin was still in poor health after he had reported an attack of dysentery.

### **Letter 726**

*to Montpellier to see the museum there* The Musée Fabre in Montpellier, about 70 km west of Arles, housed the collection of Alfred Bruyas.

*everywhere I touched the earth* From Alfred de Musset's poem 'La nuit de Décembre' (The night of December).

*the Dutchmen* Isaäcson and De Haan, referred to a few lines above.

### **Letter 728**

*our friend Gauguin* Despite Van Gogh's repeated pleas, Gauguin did not come to visit him in hospital. Gauguin later declared that on the evening in question he had decided to sleep in a hotel because of Van Gogh's aggressive, threatening behaviour. The exact circumstances of the supposed incident between Gauguin and Van Gogh are not known, however. Jo van Gogh-Bonger wrote in her introduction to the letters that Gauguin travelled back to Paris with Theo.

*the Bongers* After a long period of silence, Theo was again in touch with Andries Bonger and his sister Jo, who had refused his proposal of marriage in 1887. The renewed acquaintance led to Theo and Jo's engagement. On 21 December 1888 Theo told his mother of their plans and asked for her consent. It is not known when Theo wrote to Vincent about his engagement; Theo had in fact broached the subject during his visit.

*to remain as I am* Namely unmarried.

### **Letter 730**

*everything is always for the best* A quotation from Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).

*Roulin has been really kind* Roulin the postman arranged for Van Gogh to leave the hospital for a short while on 4 January.

### Letter 739

*Marcelle Roulin's baby daughter.*

*Icelandic fishermen* Van Gogh's idea of hanging his painting of the Berceuse in a fishing boat was prompted by what Pierre Loti writes in *Pêcheur d'Islande* (1886) about the custom of fishermen to hang the image of a saint in the saloon.

*fencing masks and gloves* Gauguin had asked Van Gogh to return these to him in an earlier letter.

*the Dutch ghost ship* One of the legends about ghost ships is that of the seventeenth-century ship *The Flying Dutchman*.

*the Horla* A fanciful story by Guy de Maupassant, which had appeared two years earlier.

*Tartarin* Alphonse Daudet's *Tartarin de Tarascon* and *Tartarin sur les Alpes*.

*Germinie Lacerteux* Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864).

### Letter 743

*a light on our way and a lamp before our feet* Ps. 119:105.

*Bruyas of Montpellier* Collector Alfred Bruyas left part of his collection to the Musée Fabre, Montpellier.

*the Faure collection* Jean Baptiste Faure's collection of Impressionist paintings included work by Manet, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and Degas.

*the Goupils* Vincent expected that Theo, if he were to bypass the firm and deal in his brother's art on his own, would get into trouble with his employers. For this reason he thought it better for Theo not to sell his work.

*when the family abandoned us* Van Gogh is referring to Uncle Cor and/or Uncle Vincent, both of whom had refused to give Theo financial support in 1886.

*we have '89... Beware of '93* The French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 and led in 1793 to the Jacobin Reign of Terror.

*père Pangloss* The main character in Voltaire's *Candide*.

*the 'Félibres'* A Provençal poets' society. In Provence, pastoral plays were especially popular, having developed from the liturgy.

*the Horla* Maupassant's story 'Le Horla'. (1887).

*St Vitus's Dance* A nervous disorder, causing convulsive movements of the arms and legs, and facial spasms. St Vitus was invoked to alleviate the sufferer's distress.

### Letter 756

*your most friendly and beneficial visit* Signac had visited Van Gogh in Arles on 23 and 24 March.

*I've rented an apartment* Van Gogh reported in a later letter that this small apartment was owned by Dr Rey, the house physician at the hospital; it is possible that he had put his apartment, or part of it, at Van Gogh's disposal. In the end Van Gogh decided against taking this apartment.

## Letter 764

*Mrs de Quesne* Lies had been engaged as a ladies' companion and carer.

*they aren't the worst fruits that wasps gnaw at* This Dutch proverb means: 'it is the virtuous who are often maligned'. Van Gogh seems to interpret the proverb incorrectly.

*Flaubert's Bouvard et Pécuchet* Gustave Flaubert's novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881).

*Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom* Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851–52).

*C. Dickens's Christmas Tales* Charles Dickens's *Christmas books* (1843–45) contained five Christmas stories: 'A Christmas carol', 'The chimes', 'The cricket on the hearth', 'The battle of life' and 'The haunted man'.

*those excellent books by Renan* Van Gogh must be referring to Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* and *L'Antéchrist*.

*'A rolling stone gathers no moss'* Van Gogh seems to mean that someone who does not stay in the same place for long or does not practise the same trade long enough will never progress.

*the Drône book* It is not known which book Willemien wrote about. Van Gogh writes 'Drône', but he certainly misread her handwriting. The writer Gustave Droz is the most likely candidate: in July 1889 Vincent was corresponding with Willemien about his book *Monsieur, madame et bébé* (1866).

*the remedy that the incomparable Dickens prescribes* Probably from Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, chapter 6.

*if Lies is in Soesterberg* Elisabeth (Lies) and Willemien were nursing the sick Mrs du Quesne in Soesterberg.

## Letter 776

*Weissenbruch* Van Gogh was mistaken: Weissenbruch did not die until 1903.

*I haven't yet gone outside* Van Gogh means that he has not yet been outside the grounds of the asylum.

*the doctor* Théophile Peyron, the medical director of the asylum.

*Troyon, Marchal, Meryon, Jundt, M. Maris, Monticelli* Constant Troyon suffered from mental illness and died in 1865. Charles Marchal suffered from depression and committed suicide in 1877. Charles Meryon suffered from depression and starved himself to death in an asylum in 1868. Gustave Adolphe Jundt threw himself to his death from his studio window in a fit of madness. Van Gogh had become acquainted with Matthijs Maris during his stay in London, when Maris was suffering from depression; he did not die until 1917. In the last years of his life Monticelli (d. 1886) suffered a series of strokes that left him partially paralysed.

*Now I take a bath twice a week* Hydrotherapy had been used to treat the mentally ill since the mid-nineteenth century.

## Letter 782

*at the Tambourin and at avenue de Clichy* Van Gogh had exhibited his own work and some Japanese prints at Café Le Tambourin, Paris, in 1887. In November–December 1887 he had organized an exhibition of paintings by himself and his friends in Grand Bouillon-Restaurant du Chalet in avenue de Clichy.

*81 virtuous cannibals* Van Gogh is referring to the neighbourhood residents, who had signed a petition complaining about him and submitted it to the mayor of Arles. Thirty people signed the petition.

*St-Ouen* Saint-Ouen is a suburb to the north of Paris.

*Le Chat Noir* A weekly magazine.

*Dicks' Shilling Shakespeare* In 1861 the London publishing house of John Dicks published an illustrated edition of Shakespeare's *Complete works*, which was reprinted a number of times.

## Letter 790

*your relatively rather long silence* Theo's last letter dated from 16 June (letter 781).

## Letter 798

*our pals in Brittany* Gauguin and De Haan.

*Mr Peyron* Théophile Peyron, the medical director of the asylum.

*the Kempen* A region in the north of Belgium.

*the portrait of Hetzel* Ernest Meissonier, *Pierre-Jules Hetzel*, 1879.

*Les Misérables* Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* (1862).

## Letter 801

*the doctor when you see him* Dr Peyron planned to visit Theo in Paris.

*the Virgin of Lourdes* In 1858, the Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes, which quickly became a popular pilgrimage site.

*Braat* Frans Braat had been a colleague of Vincent and Theo at Goupil & Cie in Paris.

*those two misfortunes* Theo had written that Pissarro had undergone eye surgery and that his mother had died.

*the Berceuse* In the last consignment of paintings from Arles, Theo had received four versions of *Augustine Roulin* ('*La berceuse*').

*to compare the second crisis with the first* In Arles Van Gogh had had three attacks between 23 December and the end of February. Apparently he viewed these attacks collectively as a single crisis.



### **Letter 811**

*Toon or Piet Prins* Vincent's classmates at elementary school in Zundert. They were brothers of the Van Goghs' maidservant.

*tulip mania* i.e., buying and selling a product purely for profit.

### **Letter 822**

*the Egyptian house* Van Gogh had requested this information in an earlier letter, concerning model historical dwellings built for the 1889 Exposition Universelle (World exhibition) in Paris.

### **Letter 850**

*the little one is well* On 31 January Theo wrote to Vincent with news of the birth of his son, Vincent Willem.

*the article on my paintings* Albert Aurier, 'Les isolés: Vincent van Gogh', *Mercure de France* (January 1890), pp. 24–29.

*a woman friend* Madame Ginoux from Arles. Van Gogh painted her portrait in November 1888.

### **Letter 853**

*Watteau's Departure for Cythera* Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Embarkation for Cythera*, 1717.

*Decameron* Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349–53).

*Meissonier's infamies* Aurier writes that it is unlikely that Van Gogh's paintings will ever be sold 'at the price fetched by the little infamies made by Mr Meissonier'.

### **Letter 863**

*since it's your birthday* Theo turned 33 on 1 May.

*fitch brushes* A thin brush used for very fine brushwork.

### **Letter 898**

*the baggage costs from Arles* Van Gogh's furniture had been sent by the Ginoux from Arles to Auvers.

*that Dutch lady* The sculptor Elisabeth Sara Clasina de Swart.

### **Letter 902**

*those gentlemen* Theo's employers at Boussod, Valadon & Cie.

*I prefer not to forget the little French I know* During his visit to Theo and Jo, Vincent had apparently insisted on speaking French instead of Dutch, and this idea must have met with resistance from Jo and Andries.

*those ladies* Jo and Annie (Andries's wife).

*the attached list of colours* The paint orders for Hirschig and Vincent have not been preserved.

## Vincent van Gogh's addresses

### **Zundert**

Markt 26: born 30 March 1853

### **The Hague**

Lange Beestenmarkt 32: July 1869–May 1873

Schenkweg 138 (now Hendrick Hamelstraat 8–22): January–July 1882

Schenkweg 136 (now Hendrick Hamelstraat 8–22): July 1882–September 1883

Assendelftstraat 16: December 1883

### **London**

87 Hackford Road: August 1873–August 1874

395 Kennington Road: August 1874–May 1875

### **Ramsgate**

11 Spencer Square: April–June 1876

### **Isleworth**

Linkfield House, 183 Twickenham Road: June 1876

Holme Court, 158 Twickenham Road: July–December 1876

### **Dordrecht**

Tolbrugstraat A312 (now 24): January–May 1877

### **Amsterdam**

Grote Kattenburgerstraat 3: May 1877–July 1878

### **Brussels**

chemin de Halage 6: August–December 1878

boulevard du Midi 72 (now boulevard du Midi 88): October 1880–April 1881

### **Borinage**

rue de l'Eglise 39, Pâturages: December 1878

rue du Petit-Wasmes 81, Wasmes: January–August 1879

rue du Pavillon 5, Cuesmes: August 1879–July 1880

rue du Pavillon 3, Cuesmes: July–October 1880

### **Etten**

Roosendaalseweg 4 (Van Gogh's parents' parsonage): April–December 1881

### **Drenthe**

Grote Kerksteeg 51 (now Kerkstraat): September 1883

Scholte's lodging house, E34 (now Van Goghstraat 1, Veenoord): October–December 1883

**Nuenen**

De Berg F523 (now Berg 26): December 1883–May 1885

Heiend F540 (now Het Park 49): studio, May 1884; home May–November 1885

**Antwerp**

Lange Beeldekenstraat/Rue des images 194 (now 224): November 1885–February 1886

**Paris**

rue Laval 25 (now rue Victor Massé): Theo's apartment; March–June 1886

rue Lepic 54: Theo's apartment, June 1886–February 1888

**Arles**

Hôtel Carrel, rue de la Cavalerie 30 (now rue Amedée-Pichot): February–May 1888

Café de la Gare, place Lamartine 30: May–September 1888

place Lamartine 2 (the Yellow House): studio, April 1888–May 1889; home, September 1888–May 1889

Hôtel-Dieu (now place Félix Rey): spends most nights in hospital December 1888–May 1889

**Saint-Rémy**

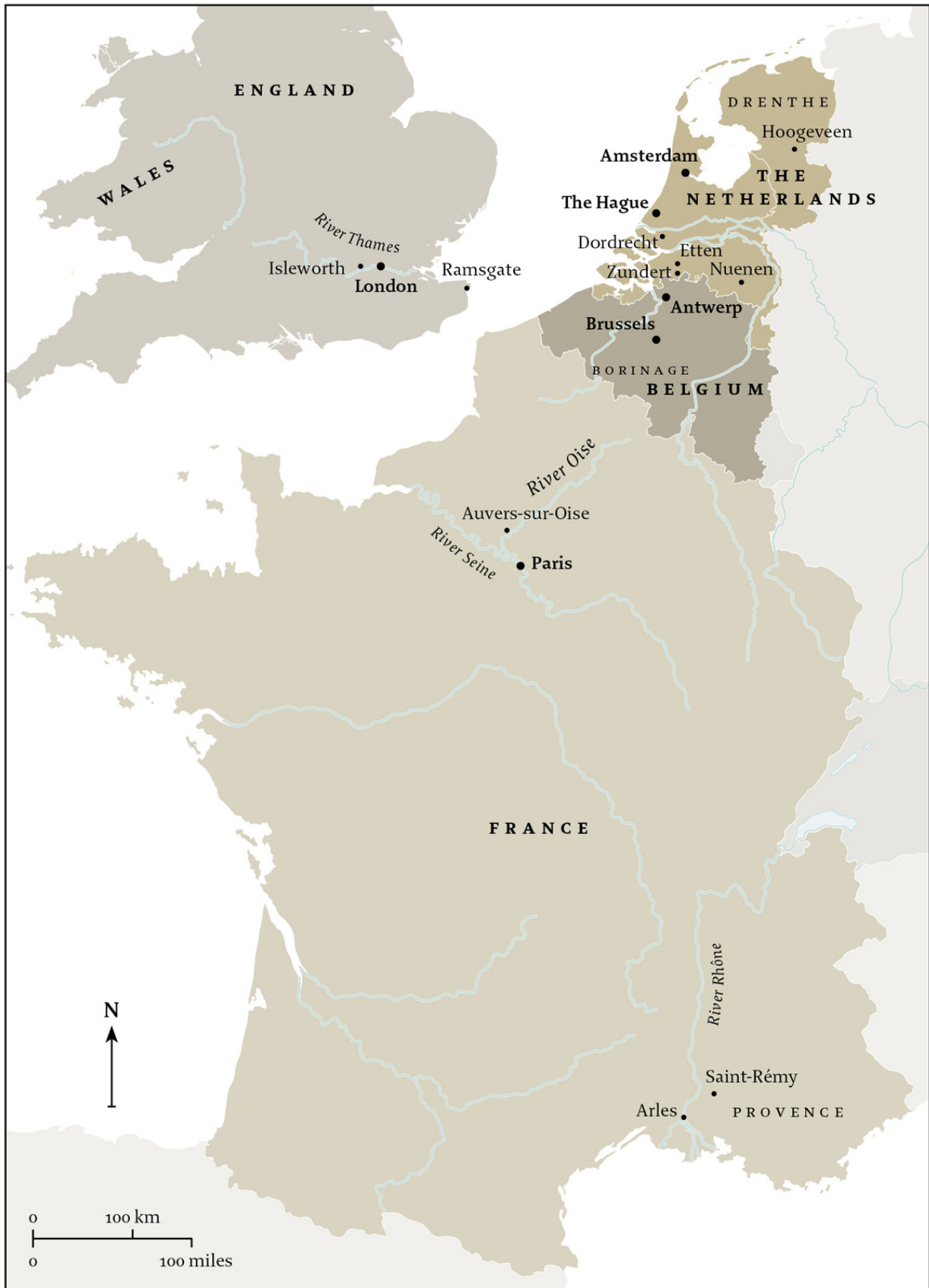
Saint-Paul de Mausole asylum: May 1889–May 1890

**Auvers-sur-Oise**

Café de la Mairie (now Auberge Ravoux, rue du Général de Gaulle 52–56): May–July 1890







Map showing where Van Gogh lived

## The letters, family and friends

Theo kept huge piles of correspondence, including letters from his family and those that Jo had written to him before and during their short marriage; at some point his mother returned the letters he had written her, and also sent him others to keep. After his death in 1891 all these letters remained in his estate thanks to Jo, their son Vincent Willem and the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, and they are now preserved in the Van Gogh Museum.

Vincent himself was decidedly careless with his mail and he is known to have thrown away or burned letters he received. We have 83 letters that were written to him, almost all of which date from the last two years of his life, the bulk of them (65) written after his first mental breakdown at the end of December 1888. There are clear indications that at a certain point Vincent decided to keep the letters from Theo and Jo, since they have been preserved almost in their entirety from the end of April 1889 on. Chance certainly played an important part in the survival of the other letters.

### **Vincent's main correspondents**

Theo van Gogh (651 letters, and 7 to Theo and Jo)

After he left high school, Vincent's younger brother Theo went to work in 1873 for the Goupil gallery in Brussels, which was later taken over by Boussod, Valadon & Cie. In 1881 Theo was made manager of the firm's boulevard Montmartre branch in Paris, and in April 1889 he married Jo Bonger in Amsterdam. Their son, Vincent Willem, was born in 1890. Theo spent the last years of his career trying to get the work of his brother and other modern artists better known. Theo died in January 1891 at the age of 34, probably as a result of Dementia paralytica, a terminal stage of syphilis.

Anthon van Rappard (58 letters)

Van Gogh met the Dutch artist Anthon van Rappard in Brussels, where he was a student at the Académie des Beaux-Arts; Van Rappard later allowed him to use his studio. Van Rappard's birth into an aristocratic family and his contacts in academic art circles made him part of the establishment that Van Gogh disliked. However, there were important similarities in their views, but a difference of opinion in 1885 brought an end to their correspondence and friendship. Van Rappard died in 1892 at the age of 33.

Emile Bernard (22 letters)

In the two years that Van Gogh lived in Paris he spent a lot of time with Bernard, a French artist who was 15 years younger. They painted together, helped each other with contacts, and exhibited together. After Van Gogh's departure for Arles they conducted a lively correspondence and kept each other abreast of what they were doing through letter sketches and drawings.

Willemien van Gogh (21 letters)

Willemien (Wil) was the sister to whom Van Gogh was closest. She never married, and lived with her mother. In 1902 she was admitted as a patient to a psychiatric institution in Veldwijk where she lived until her death in 1941.

Theodorus van Gogh and Anna van Gogh-Carbentus (5 letters to both, and 12 to Anna, of which 8 to her, 1 to her and Theo, 3 to her and Willemien)

Van Gogh's father, Theodorus van Gogh, was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. The parsonages he occupied were all in peasant villages in the province of North Brabant: Zundert (1849–71), Helvoirt (1871–75), Etten (1875–82) and Nuenen (1882–85). In 1851 he married Van Gogh's mother, Anna Carbentus, daughter of a bookbinder from The Hague. She supported her husband's ministry, visiting the sick of the parish and running a sewing and knitting class. Theodorus died in 1885 of a stroke. After his death, Anna went to live in Breda with Willemien, and they moved to Leiden in 1889. Anna died in 1907.

Paul Gauguin (4 letters)

French artist Paul Gauguin was already a well-known figure in the Parisian avant-garde in 1886, although he found it difficult to sell his work. Van Gogh and Gauguin may first have met at Boussod, Valadon & Cie, the gallery that was run by Theo in Paris, or at the exhibition organized by Vincent at Restaurant du Chalet in November-December 1887. Gauguin arrived in Arles at the end of October 1888 and lived with Van Gogh for two months, until Van Gogh's ear-cutting incident. Although they would never see one another again, their friendship continued – surviving letters show that in 1890 they cautiously explored the possibility of a new collaboration, but Van Gogh died before this could be taken further.

## History of the publication of the letters

### **Early publications**

The rise in popularity of Van Gogh's paintings shortly after his death coincided with growing levels of interest in his letters. Indeed, the letters had a significant effect on public awareness of his work. Brief quotations from them appeared in the catalogue to a Van Gogh exhibition in Amsterdam as early as 1892. In August 1893 longer extracts appeared in the avant-garde magazine *Van Nu en Straks*, selected by the artist Henry van de Velde in consultation with the editor-in-chief August Vermeylen, whose intention was 'to establish a memorial to praise Vincent van Gogh'.

By April 1893 Emile Bernard had begun to publish a series of extracts from the letters he had received from Van Gogh in the literary review *Mercure de France*, a project that continued with some interruptions until August 1897. This was of inestimable importance in arousing interest in Van Gogh.

The excerpts from both *Van Nu en Straks* and *Mercure de France* were published in German translation in Bruno Cassirer's magazine *Kunst und Künstler* in 1904 and 1905, and in 1906 Cassirer collected the translated letters in a book, *Vincent van Gogh, Briefe*, essentially an anthology of the (late) correspondence.

Van Gogh's letters to Anthon van Rappard were published in the Netherlands in 1905. A complete edition of the letters to Emile Bernard was published by Ambroise Vollard in Paris in 1911, with a long preface and four other articles by Bernard about Van Gogh. The text of the letters was expurgated, although Bernard wrote that he was reproducing the letters in full, including the peculiarities of Van Gogh's French and the sometimes improper language, which, he asserted, had often been prompted by drink.

### **The 1914 edition**

The publication in 1914 of the three volumes of *Brieven aan zijn broeder* (Letters to his brother), edited by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, was the first major edition of the letters. She herself had made a huge contribution to the recognition of Van Gogh's work in the intervening years by exhibiting and selling drawings and paintings. Her introduction to the letters was strictly biographical and offered the first extensive description of the artist's life



based on the accounts of witnesses. The letters were printed in the language in which Van Gogh wrote them: the first two volumes covered the Dutch years and volume 3 contained the (predominantly) French letters, beginning with those sent from Paris in 1886. She had no qualms about editing the text, often omitting a name, a few words or a whole passage, short or long. In other cases she suppressed passages about issues that impinged on family sensitivities. A two-volume German edition of Jo's publication was also published in 1914 by the art dealer Paul Cassirer (Bruno's cousin), who had sold many works by Van Gogh from 1900 onwards.

### **The 1952–1954 edition**

As translations of existing publications began to proliferate during the 1920s – into German, English and Japanese – and the artist's fame continued to grow, letters from and to other people gradually surfaced. The English translation of the letters to Bernard appeared in 1938, edited by art critic Douglas Cooper (under the pseudonym Douglas Lord). Referring to the original manuscripts, he was the first to annotate the letters, looking at the chronology with a critical eye and improving the sequence that Bernard had imposed in 1911. Cooper applied the same rigorous scholarly standards to his later edition of the letters in the Van Gogh Museum collection, *Paul Gauguin, 45 Lettres à Vincent, Théo et Jo van Gogh* (1983), which included no fewer than fifteen previously unpublished letters received by Vincent.

After Jo's death in 1925, her son Vincent Willem van Gogh took on his mother's mission, and in 1932 he published his father's letters to Vincent between 1888 and 1890, *Théo van Gogh, Lettres à son frère Vincent*. After the Second World War, V.W. van Gogh conceived of an ambitious edition: *Vincent van Gogh, Verzamelde brieven* (collected letters), including a number of previously unpublished letters. This collection appeared between 1952 and 1954 in four volumes and was translated in its entirety into English (Thames & Hudson 1958), Italian (1959), French (1960) and German (1965), becoming the essential point of reference for international Van Gogh research for half a century. V.W. van Gogh wanted to provide a counterweight to all the free interpretations, fables and myths about Van Gogh. In 1977, V.W. van Gogh published in facsimile all Van Gogh's late letters in French from the Van Gogh Museum's collection in a deluxe two-volume edition, *Letters of Vincent van Gogh 1886–1890*.

### **The 1990 edition**

The invaluable contributions of Jan Hulsker to Van Gogh scholarship include his pioneering work *Van Gogh door Van Gogh. De brieven als commentaar op zijn werk* (1973). The letters were at the heart of all Hulsker's research. His profound knowledge of Van Gogh's life is reflected in several standard works, including the documentary biography of Vincent and Theo (*Vincent and Theo van Gogh. A dual biography*, 1990) and the catalogue of all Van Gogh's works, published for the first time in 1977 and reprinted in 1996 with countless additions and corrections (*The New Complete Van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches*). He also edited the selection *Een leven in brieven* (1980), which has provided an introduction to the letters for many tens of thousands of Dutch-speaking readers.

In 1990, the centenary year of the artist's death, the Van Gogh Museum published *De brieven*, a new Dutch edition of the complete correspondence, that included all known letters from and to Van Gogh and incorporating 21 previously unpublished letters as well as Hulsker's new information on dating. The letters were no longer grouped by correspondent but placed in a single chronological sequence, and consequently a complete renumbering was undertaken.

### **The 2009 edition**

In 1994 the Van Gogh Museum launched the Van Gogh Letters Project in partnership with Huygens ING (a division of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences). The 2009 edition (launched in both print and online versions) was the result of fifteen years of dedicated research by a team of editors and translators, who not only built on the knowledge and scholarship of the preceding century, but – most importantly – who returned to the letters themselves, creating new transcriptions and fresh translations of the entire existing collection of both letters and related manuscripts. The letters were published in their entirety with illustrations and annotations, together with additional information about people and places, in Dutch, French and English, in simultaneous online and printed editions. It is from the transcriptions and translations of the Van Gogh Letters Project, the 'gold standard' in Van Gogh scholarship, that the present selection has been made by the original team of editors, whose introductions, notes and commentaries have been adapted, revised and updated for the present publication from the 2009 edition and from *Ever Yours: The Essential Letters* (2014).

## Further reading

[www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org)

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G.A. Aurier, 'Les isolés: Vincent van Gogh', *Mercure de France* (January 1890), pp. 24–29

Martin Bailey, *Studio of the South: Van Gogh in Provence*, London 2016

———, *Starry Night: Van Gogh at the Asylum*, London 2018

Nienke Bakker, Louis van Tilborgh and Laura Prins, *On the verge of insanity. Van Gogh and his illness*, exhib. cat. Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2016

Julian Bell, *Van Gogh: A Power Seething*, Boston 2015

Jos ten Berge et al., *The paintings of Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum*, Otterlo 2003

Carel Blotkamp et al., *Vincent van Gogh: Between earth and heaven, the landscapes*, exhib. cat. Basel (Kunstmuseum) 2009

Françoise Cachin and Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Van Gogh à Paris*, exhib. cat. Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 1988

Gustave Coquiot, *Vincent van Gogh*, Paris 1923

Victor Doiteau and Edgar Leroy, *La folie de Van Gogh*, Paris 1928

———, *Vincent van Gogh et le drame de l'oreille coupée*, Paris 1939

Roland Dorn, *Décoration. Vincent van Goghs Werkreihe für das Gelbe Haus in Arles*, Hildesheim/Zurich/New York 1990

——— et al., *Vincent van Gogh and the modern movement 1890–1914*, exhib. cat. Essen (Museum Folkwang) and Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh) 1990–1991

Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin. The studio of the south*, exhib. cat. Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago) and Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2001–02

Ann Dumas et al., *The real Van Gogh: The artist and his letters*, exhib. cat. London (Royal Academy of Arts) 2010

J.-B. de la Faille, *The works of Vincent van Gogh. His paintings and drawings*, Amsterdam 1970

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Martin Gayford, *The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin and nine turbulent weeks in Arles*, London 2006

Patrick Grant, *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh: A Critical Study*, Edmonton 2014

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Gloria Groom et al., *Van Gogh's bedrooms*, exhib. cat. Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago) 2016

A.M. Hammacher, *Van Gogh. A documentary biography*, London 1982

Archibald Standish Hartrick, *A Painter's Pilgrimage Through Fifty Years*, Cambridge 1939

Ella Hendriks, Marije Vellekoop et al., *Van Gogh's Sunflowers Illuminated: Art meets Science* (Van Gogh Museum Studies, Vol. 1), Amsterdam 2019

Sjraar van Heugten, *Vincent van Gogh drawings 1. The early years 1880–1883*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam and Wormer 1996

———, *Vincent van Gogh drawings 2. Nuenen 1883–1885*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam and Bussum 1997

———, Joachim Pissarro and Chris Stolwijk, *Van Gogh and the colors of the night*, exhib. cat. New York (Museum of Modern Art) and Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2008–09

——— et al., *Van Gogh: The birth of an artist*, exhib. cat. Mons (Musée des Beaux-Arts) 2015

Cornelia Homburg, *The copy turns original: Vincent van Gogh and a new approach to traditional art practice*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1996

——— et al., *Vincent van Gogh and the painters of the Petit Boulevard*, exhib. cat. St Louis (St Louis Art Museum) 2001

——— et al., *Van Gogh up close*, exh. cat. Ottawa (National Gallery of Canada) and Philadelphia (Philadelphia Museum of Art) 2012

Jan Hulsker, *Vincent and Theo van Gogh. A dual biography*, Ann Arbor 1990

———, *The new complete Van Gogh. Paintings, drawings, sketches*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1996

Colta Ives et al., *Vincent van Gogh. The drawings*, exhib. cat. Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) and New York (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) 2005.

Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and his letters*, Amsterdam and Brussels 2006

——— and Jan Robert (eds), *Brief happiness. The correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, Amsterdam and Zwolle 1999

———, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds), *Vincent van Gogh. Painted with words: The letters to Emile Bernard*, New York 2007

Tsukasa Kōdera, *Vincent van Gogh. Christianity versus nature*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1990

——— and Yvette Rosenberg (eds), *The mythology of Vincent van Gogh*, Tokyo, Philadelphia and Amsterdam 1993

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Hans Luijten, *Van Gogh and love*, Amsterdam and Brussels 2007

- , *Alles voor Vincent: het leven van Jo van Gogh-Bonger*, Amsterdam 2019
- Teio Meedendorp, *Drawings and prints by Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum*, Otterlo 2007
- Bernadette Murphy, *Van Gogh's ear. The true story*, London 2016
- Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, London 2011
- Ronald Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Arles*, exh. cat. New York (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1984
- , *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*, exh. cat. New York (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1986–87
- , *Van Gogh*, exh. cat. Martigny (Fondation Pierre Gianadda) 2000
- John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin*, New York 1978
- Mark Roskill, *Van Gogh, Gauguin and the Impressionist Circle*, London 1970
- Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin. The search for sacred art*, New York 2000
- Timothy Standring and Louis van Tilborgh, *Becoming Van Gogh*, exh. cat. Denver Art Museum 2012
- Susan Alyson Stein (ed.), *Van Gogh: a retrospective*, New York 1986
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- Chris Stolwijk et al., *Vincent's choice. The musée imaginaire of Van Gogh*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2003
- Judy Sund, *True to temperament. Vincent van Gogh and French naturalist literature*, Cambridge 1992
- Louis van Tilborgh and Marie-Pierre Salé, *Millet/Van Gogh*, exh. cat. Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 1998–99
- Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh paintings 1. Dutch period 1881–1885, Van Gogh Museum*, Amsterdam and Blaricum 1999
- Louis van Tilborgh and Ella Hendriks, *Vincent van Gogh Paintings, Volume 2. Antwerp and Paris 1885–1888, Van Gogh Museum*, Amsterdam 2011
- Louis van Tilborgh et al., *Van Gogh & Japan*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2018
- Mark Edo Tralbaut, *Van Gogh*, London 1969
- Evert van Uitert, Sjraar van Heugten and Louis van Tilborgh, *Vincent van Gogh. Paintings*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh) and Milan 1990
- Wouter van der Veen, *Vincent van Gogh: A literary mind* (Van Gogh Studies 2), Zwolle and Amsterdam 2009
- Natascha Veldhorst, *Van Gogh and music. A symphony in blue and yellow*, New Haven and London 2018
- Marije Vellekoop and Sjraar van Heugten, *Vincent van Gogh drawings 3. Antwerp and Paris 1885–1888, Van Gogh Museum*, Amsterdam 2001



Marije Vellekoop and Roelie Zwikker, *Vincent van Gogh drawings 4. Arles, Saint-Rémy and Auvers 1888–1890*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam 2007

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Carol M. Zemel, *Van Gogh's progress. Utopia, modernity, and late-nineteenth-century art*, Berkeley etc. 1997

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## Picture credits

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[Pages 287, 288](#): 691A–C Private collection

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[Pages 314, 315](#): 756A–B Private collection

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[Page 355](#): 822A–B Thaw Collection, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York

### **Colour plates:**

[The Night Café, 1888](#). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

[The Starry Night, 1888](#). Musée d'Orsay, Paris

[Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin, 1888](#). Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Museum

[Lullaby: Madame Augustine Roulin Rocking a Cradle \(La Berceuse\), 1889](#). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

[Hospital at Saint-Rémy, 1889](#). Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

[Field with a Ploughman, 1889](#). Private collection, Asia.

[Doctor Gachet sitting at a table with books and a glass with foxglove, 1890](#). Private collection

[Daubigny's Garden, 1890](#). Hiroshima Museum of Art

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